

12-15-2014

Independence at Large: Contemporary China's Alternative Music Scenes and the Cultural Practices of Post-Socialist Urban Youth

Shan Huang
University of South Carolina - Columbia

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Huang, S.(2014). *Independence at Large: Contemporary China's Alternative Music Scenes and the Cultural Practices of Post-Socialist Urban Youth*. (Master's thesis). Retrieved from <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/3042>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

INDEPENDENCE AT LARGE: CONTEMPORARY CHINA'S ALTERNATIVE MUSIC
SCENES AND THE CULTURAL PRACTICES OF POST-SOCIALIST URBAN YOUTH

by

Shan Huang

Bachelor of Science
Beijing Normal University, 2012

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts in

Anthropology

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2014

Accepted by:

Marc Moskowitz, Director of Thesis

Jennifer Reynolds, Reader

Sherina Feliciano-Santos, Reader

Lacy Ford, Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

© Copyright by Shan Huang, 2014
All Rights Reserved.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to the University of South Carolina, the Walker Institute, and my parents, who supported my two years and four months of graduate studies.

My deepest gratitude goes to my advisor Marc Moskowitz, an excellent mentor who has made a sound investment in my anthropological training. Without his empathetic understanding and constant encouragement to do quality work throughout my time in graduate school, I would not have completed this research. I am particularly grateful for his professional attitude, which has served as my model for academic anthropologists.

I have been fortunate to have two very intelligent anthropologists on my thesis committee. Jennifer Reynolds has given solid and helpful comments on this thesis. In particular, Chapter 4 originated as the term paper of her linguistic anthropology seminar. Sherina Feliciano-Santos' careful readings and valuable suggestions on every chapter have greatly improved the integrity of this thesis.

Thanks to all the talented musicians and critical observers in Beijing's alternative music scenes who I interviewed and hung out with. It was their wonderful stories and comments that have made this project possible. Thanks to Hu Chenyu, Deng Chenglong, Liu Xinyu, and other folks I met during my fieldwork. They made the Drum Tower area—my field site—a fun place to stay. Thanks to Fan Yan and Maybe Mars Record for generously offering me access to the media archives collected by the company. Thanks to Zoomin' Night and its organizer Zhu Wenbo, the venue XP, Chui Wan, Vagus Nerve,

and numerous bands and musicians who performed at XP. The soundscapes they created were the most enjoyable part of my research.

Thanks to Liu Fei, Yan Jun, Bi Minghui, and Liu Xiuyuan for their informative comments on my project during our informal conversations. Discussions with Zeng Yukun, Xie Tianyu, Chen Jiaying, Adam Kielman, Hu Leye, and Gabriele de Seta in academic conferences I attended were important in shaping and adjusting my ideas. The whimsical yet productive conversations I have had with Wang Yifan since this spring have contributed to this thesis in a special way. Thanks to Julia McKinney and Sam Hackworth at the writing center of the University of South Carolina. Their patience and expertise have substantially increased the readability of this thesis.

Finally, my most personal gratitude goes to Zhou Ruichao, Guo Jia, Cui Yuanshuo, Sun Siwei, He Shu, and many other friends I have known since my teenage years. This project would not have been completed without the inspiration derived from the collaborative experience of running our little magazine. Beijing will not be a livable city without you.

ABSTRACT

Using contemporary Beijing's alternative music scenes as a focal point, this ethnographic research seeks to enrich the understanding of China's post-socialist urban youth by examining their cultural practices. First, this thesis offers an analytical account of the popularizing embrace of "independent cultures," which is defined as a collection of experienceable objects and activities in musical, filmic, theatric, and other cultural forms that are well recognized yet believed by advocates as having aesthetic and participatory features that are different from those produced in the popular culture industry. While the vogue for independent cultures is substantially conditioned by the socioeconomic attributes of China's post-socialist reform, it also involves a set of generation-specific attempts to articulate the unstructured and incongruous aspects of such seemingly consistent social transformations. Second, the thesis investigates the current popularity of independent music by examining how such music is (re)produced through social interactions. Specifically, it examines how language plays an important role in the functioning of different kinds of "music ideologies," which is defined as a set of beliefs, feelings, and reflexive understandings of music that guide related cultural practices and produce new practitioners. By comparing the differing ways in which the specificities in the live performances of rock-based independent music and experimental music are textually mediated to the public under the influence of certain music ideologies, this thesis shows that musical genres are reproduced not only through musicality, but also the related forms of sociality encouraged in different music ideologies.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	v
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vii
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND PROBLEMATICS.....	19
CHAPTER 3 INDEPENDENCE AT LARGE: CONTEMPORARY CHINA’S <i>WENYI</i> YOUTH AND THEIR CULTURAL PRACTICES.....	41
CHAPTER 4 PRODUCING GENRES THROUGH LANGUAGE: TEXTUAL MEDIATION OF MUSIC IDEOLOGIES IN CHINA’S ALTERNATIVE MUSIC SCENES.....	82
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS.....	114
REFERENCES.....	119

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1 Vavabond (Weiwei) performing at Zoomin' Night	18
Figure 3.1 In the break of Duck Fight Goose's concert held at XP	81
Figure 4.1 Vagus Nerve and Josh Feola performing at Zoomin' Night	109
Figure 4.2 He Fan and Liu Xinyu performing at Zoomin' Night	109
Figure 4.3 Deng Chenglong performing at Zoomin' Night's 5th anniversary concert	110
Figure 4.4 Zhang Shouwang performing at XP	110
Figure 4.5 Wang Ziheng performing at Zoomin' Night	111
Figure 4.6 Zhu Wenbo performing at Zoomin' Night	112
Figure 4.7 Inside the School Bar	113
Figure 4.8 Chui Wan performing at XP	113

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Using contemporary Beijing's alternative music scenes as a focal point, this ethnographic research seeks to enrich the understanding of China's post-socialist urban youth by examining their cultural practices. The majority of people being discussed in this thesis are the first generation of only children who grew up in China's expanding urban middle-class families and have received or are receiving higher education experience.

First, this research probes into these young people's personal history and social lives regarding music and investigates how they articulate these experiences. Based on the analysis of these ethnographic accounts, this thesis addresses a discussion of contemporary urban Chinese youth's popularizing embrace of "independent cultures," which I define as a collection of experienceable objects and activities in musical, filmic, theatric, and other cultural forms that are well recognized yet believed by advocates as having aesthetic and participatory features that are different from those produced in the popular culture industry. I will show how a group of urban youth identify themselves as distinctive subjects with a greater sense of independence through a framework of perception that is crucially formed in their engagements with independent cultures. It is argued that while the vogue for independent cultures is substantially conditioned by the sociopolitical and economic specificities of China's post-socialist reform, the same vogue involves a set of generation-specific attempts to articulate the unstructured and

incongruous aspects of such seemingly consistent social transformations. This thesis showcases that upper-middle economic investment is crucial in cultivating and maintaining the appreciation of independent cultures, and most participants of these cultural practices do have urban middle-class backgrounds. Yet because the broad emergence of such cultural preference is only found in the current generation, the appreciation of independent cultures among these urban middle-class youth cannot be easily seen as a reproduction of class-specific culture, as is theorized in Pierre Bourdieu's classic analysis of French society (Bourdieu 1984). Instead, it is more like a process of semi-reproduction in which a new kind of mindset of younger generation is produced on the basis of the economic and material progress made by the older generation. To some extent, their daily practices can be read as a form of resistance, for what they do in the course of inventing themselves towards a different social kind has strategically challenged some of the hegemonic ways of life-making imposed on them through educational institutions. However, because in their personal cultural politics, carving out an enjoyable individualistic world by distancing themselves from the assumedly insipid mass appears to be more attractive than changing such insipidity more directly through collective actions, practices revolving around cultural taste might be unlikely to affect public issues outside the regime of independent cultures.

Second, the thesis investigates the current popularity of independent music by examining how such music is (re)produced through social interactions. Specifically, it examines how language plays an important role in the functioning of different kinds of "music ideologies," which is defined as a set of beliefs, feelings, and reflexive understandings of music that guide related cultural practices and produce new

practitioners. By comparing the differing ways in which the specificities in the live performances of rock-based independent music and experimental music are textually mediated to the public under the influence of certain music ideologies, this thesis shows that musical genres are reproduced not only through musicality, but also the related forms of sociality encouraged in different music ideologies. Specifically, I will show that “expectation” and “expansion” are two under-discussed ideological concerns in Chinese rock music. Expectation means a logic of pleasure that assumes audiences are satisfied with live concert performances once their pre-performance expectations have been actualized. Expansion refers to an agenda to expand the scale of the rock scene and spread this music to a broader population. These findings in the domain of music shed light on the dilemma of the production of independent cultures in general: when “nonconformist” engagement becomes more predictable and easier to repeat, how can the advocates still maintain an independent status through cultural practices? In the experimental music scene, practitioners are concerned more about the small-scaled intimacy and the unpredictability in live performances. The fact that such social interactions in experimental music is usually unable to be repeated makes this form of music less likely to be incorporated as it confronts mainstream popular culture. Consequently, this observation makes the common perception *experimental music culture is hard to expand only because of its internal musicality* problematic, as it does not consider the sociality involved in the practices of experimental music.

1.1 Encountering Independent Cultures in Beijing

It was a Saturday afternoon in July 2013. I was on my way to the debut of my friends’ play that started at 3pm. The venue, Penghao Theater (蓬蒿剧场), is an art house

located at the midway of Nan Luogu Xiang (南锣鼓巷), an expanded alley that serves as a nucleus of artistic-cultural locales in the area around Drum Tower (鼓楼) built at the northern end of the Inner City's west-east axis. At 2:20 pm, I had been very close to the north entrance of the alley, thinking that I certainly would be able to walk the last half-kilometer in twenty minutes or so. However, I had underestimated the popularity of this seven-meter wide alleyway: no sooner had I begun this final stretch of my walk than I found myself stuck in the unceasing flows of young people strolling along the street from opposite directions. It is not difficult to tell, from their inquisitive eyes in synchrony with slow, casual gaits, that most of these youthful figures were visitors to this alley.

Over the past few years, Nan Luogu Xiang has quickly become a favorite spot for young visitors due to a great number of privately-run shops specializing in traditional clothing, food, and handiworks, as well as bohemian-like stores that sell quirky products. Many young tourists carried professional cameras with them, occasionally removing the lens covers and taking pictures of their friends with the street scenes in the background. People also gathered around food peddlers, some of which are certified, waiting for snacks commonly seen in urban streets, such as fried chicken nuggets and pearl milk tea.

Moving at a speed of less than two kilometers per hour, I was five minutes late, and when I arrived at the theater, I found that its more than one hundred seats had all been occupied. I was surprised by how crowded the building was because of the semi-professional nature of the play and its lack of formal promotion.

Very similar to the changes that have taken place in Nan Luogu Xiang, the whole Drum Tower area has gradually become a prominent space for alternative cultural activities celebrated by urban youth. In the several decades before its reconstruction in

the 1990s, the Drum Tower area was not much different from other residential blocks in Beijing's Inner City. Now, for the first time, artistic and cultural flows are densely inlaid into the landscape of a neighborhood in central Beijing. This change has not only brought many visitors, but also a new way of imaging Beijing's cultural geography. Penghao Theater, for example, held more than seventy independent plays between May and August 2013 (the aforementioned one was one of them). This new urban artistic-cultural geography is even more visible in terms of the music scene, owing to the fact that nearly 90% of well-recognized "underground" venues in Beijing are located within this area. An increasing number of small boutique stores, as well as coffee shops, pubs, and fancy restaurants all around this area, have also fashioned the street scene around Drum Tower from silent infrastructures to lively locales open for cultural and entertaining experiences and consumptions. Alongside these changes, a growing number of local college students have begun to spend their weekend days in this teeming urban zone, intending for what is often believed to be distinctive traveling experience. A typical schedule of them includes roaming around several main streets, conducting unplanned purchases, having dinner at restaurants they randomly encounter, and finally, going to rock concerts nearby.

In contrast to other more lately developed regions characterized with high-rise buildings and much wider roads, the Drum Tower area has a unique cozy geography that shapes the spatial and affective basis of the Chinese trope *renao* (热闹), which refers to a physicality of heat and noise formulated through a collection of people who get together densely in a certain place. Yet as a result of the revitalization of residential areas like Nan Luogu Xiang, few activities on these youth's list are free of charge. As Farquhar and Zhang (2012: 92) note, although the public space in Beijing is complimentary by itself,

practices taking place in such space are usually not complimentary – contemporary Beijingers join public space primarily through consumption. This observation applies to the independent culture tour at the Drum Tower area: however individualized this kind of urban journey it is, is normally based on the act of buying encouraged by the highly commercialized infrastructures all around.

The transformation of the Drum Tower area has been so significant that one can tell it even from a pedestrian's few words. One day, as we were nearing a restaurant a half-hour walking distance from the tiny apartment rented by Xiao Hu, one of my interlocutors, she casually remarked, looking at the screen of her smart phone, in her iconic manner of slight exaggeration: "Hmm... I haven't lost the WiFi signal since we left my place..." Xiao Hu's spontaneous comment sharply, though unintentionally, reveals some important characteristics of the two-kilometer route we had just taken and implicitly signifies her insider's status within this area. Since she took a part-time job at Maybe Mars, a record company specialized in alternative rock, much of Xiao Hu's daily work and her day-to-day social life has been actually taking place in the Drum Tower area, an eminent base for the city's independent cultures. Taking music-related places as an example, before Xiao Hu made her comment, the locales we had passed include Zajia Lab (杂家), Duyin record store (独音唱片), Lanxi Bar (蓝溪酒吧), Temple Bar, 666 music shop, Mao Live-house, and more than a dozen of instrument shops specializing in guitar sales and training. Many of these places and the surrounding cafes and bars offer WiFi signals to their customers, an extra amenity one would not often receive at more traditional stores. Due to her everyday engagement with these locales, Xiao Hu had quite

a lot of Wi-Fi passwords saved in her iPhone, and this ensured her moving accessibility to the Internet in Drum Tower.

With the help of new urban landscapes like Drum Tower, “independence” is quickly extending its notion as a non-commercial phrase used in alternative cultural milieus to a popular sign open for purchase. Drawing upon fieldwork conducted in the Drum Tower area with different kinds of participants in contemporary Beijing’s alternative music scenes, this thesis attempts to provide a grounded analysis of the emerging popularity of independent cultures in urban China.

1.2 What “Independence”: Clarification of Terms

As a term that will be constantly used throughout this thesis, the notion of “independence” (independent) has two layers of connotations. The first applies to a set of phrases about “independent cultures,” such as independent music, independent film, and independent theater. In these phrases, “independent” suggests a mode of production and enjoyment that is considered as being uninfluenced by external forces that could impact the genuineness of certain cultural products or performances. For example, music labeled as independent is thought to be the work of artists who sincerely want to express their feelings or opinions, as opposed to realizing other purposes through performing. Independent bands committed to such an agenda are believed to be in sharp contrast to popular singers whose give performances because of contracts. Yet as I will further show in Chapter 3, this understanding of “independence” is experiencing a process of deconstruction. This is because the signifier of independence is widely being commercialized into the booming market of urban youth culture where mass produced

“independent” objects are sold to consumers who do not necessarily celebrate such an ideology of production.

A second way of using independent in this particular project roughly applies to “independent thinkers,” which refers to non-conformists in Chinese universities who look for a critical framework of thinking in their own lives. This framework is different from either what is given by the school or what is held by their peers as self-evident. Independence in this context thus connotes an intention towards an intellectual and psychological autonomy. As we will see in the ethnographic vignettes, such inclinations towards the autonomy of thoughts and personality can also lead to actions that bring changes to these non-conformists’ everyday lives.

Finally, the notion of “the embrace/celebration of independence” combines the two connotations mentioned above. It refers to a process in which these two ways of appreciating independence – one describes a preferred mode of producing and enjoying independent cultures, the other depicts a near-intellectual strategy of self-identification – are found co-existing in the same person. This person, the subject who embraces independence, constantly builds connections between cultural tastes and ways of thinking.

1.3 From Underground Rock to Independent Music: The Transformation of Chinese Alternative Music Scenes

This thesis is writing in the course of a transformation of Chinese alternative music¹ in which “independent music” has substantially replaced its predecessor, “underground rock,” in urban youth’s daily language regarding rock-based musical

¹ By using “alternative music,” I am roughly referring to rock-based musical genres and practices that are perceived to be non-mainstream. “Alternative music scenes” include underground rock, independent music, experimental music, and other processes in which these genres are undergoing division or integration.

practices. The notion of “underground rock” had been the prevailing term in describing China’s alternative music until the late 2000s. As I will explain more explicitly in Chapter 2, the emphasis on rock’s underground-ness reflects a dichotomy, much valorized by early generations of rockers. The dichotomy asserts that rock music is in clear contrast to other popular genres. The term independent music has risen in use over the past few years. Unlike the marginal status experienced by underground rockers, independent music has become a near popular genre enjoyed by a growing number of urban youth. While independent music is still very rock-based in terms of musicality and it inherits many narratives from rock discourses, it greatly de-emphasizes the musico-ideological unification in which rock is often read, in a grand manner, as having essential values and undertaking many social tasks.

In the scholarship on China’s underground rock from the late 1980s to the mid-2000s, analysts have shown that this genre is often associated with non-musical indexicals such as upper class, intellectual, and Beijing-based (de Kloet 2010; Jones 1992; Moskowitz 2010; Sun 2012). Yet the emergence of the independent music scene and the new generation of participants has destabilized these notions indexed by music. First, because most young participants of the independent music scene have urban middle-class backgrounds, it complicates the prevailing image of “upper-class” about Chinese rock established during earlier periods. As I will show in Chapters 2 and 3, although young music fans and musicians today still belong to a very prestigious socioeconomic group in China, their social status is not exceptionally high in Chinese cities where the number of middle-class families has substantially increased.

Second, the impression that Chinese rock is music for intellectuals and well-educated social elites also needs to be adjusted. I will show that the way that current independent music fans enjoy this music does not contain a huge sense of intellectuality as previous literature suggests. Although today's participants are still well educated university students, the fact that China's higher education has considerably expanded makes their education experience not extraordinarily eminent. Additionally, as I will elaborate on in Chapter 3, because their enjoyment of music is a cultural practice between a knowledge project and an entertaining pastime, contemporary participants of independent music have actually reworked the logic of intellectuality to a more enjoyable one, instead of treating it in a heavyweight manner.

Lastly, while it is true that rock became a subculture initially in Beijing, and the city has been the unquestionable center of China's alternative music for a long time, the new musical occurrences suggest that such a Chinese rock map needs some revisions. More specifically, living in Beijing or any one of the few famous rock cities is no longer an exclusive condition one needs to become an active participant of independent music. Although many young musicians still come to Beijing for a better career, their preference for rock-based music subculture formed before they decided to move. Due to the development of the technologies of mediation, such cultural taste has greatly "de-territorialized" (Appadurai 1996) and has reached more urban youth who can afford the investment needed for cultivating such taste, wherever they live. In short, while there is great continuity between underground rock and independent music, the past few years have witnessed substantial transitions within the uninterrupted socio-musical processes.

1.4 Arrangement of the Thesis

Chapter 2 reviews the scholarship on China's alternative music scenes and addresses some problematics with the recent occurrences. This chapter traces both the historicity and contemporaneity of China's alternative music and its relation with popular culture. I will show that "independent music" has almost replaced its predecessor, "underground rock," in the everyday discourse, forming a more musically inclusive meta-genre that a growing number of urban youth buy into. In addition, this chapter offers a sketch of the historical and socioeconomic situation of post-socialist China in which the trend of independent cultures is rising. Most of the participants of current independent music culture were born between the mid-1980s and the early 1990s. They are the first generation to grow up in urban families that can be categorized as middle class, a social class that emerged widely in China after a decade of Deng Xiaoping's economic reform in the late 1970s. They are also the first generation that has experienced the expansion of higher education. In terms of cultural practices, members of this generation have been continuously exposed to new media for much of their lives and have skillfully learned to manipulate it. We will see why these conditions are important in shaping a number of generational characteristics of the young subjects in the vogue for independent cultures.

Chapter 3 describes and analyzes the quickly growing cultural taste for and practices of independence among "*wenyi* youth" (artistic-cultural youth, literally), an emerging group of contemporary urban Chinese youth who prefer alternative cultural products and embrace the idea of living differently. By juxtaposing their participation in music worlds with their personal history and social lives, this chapter asks, what does such an embrace of independence tell us about China's post-socialist generation? I argue against the idea that these urban youth are just "having fun" by participating in musical

activities, as their common portraits in the popular press suggest. Nor are they as rebellious as is iconized by the rock ideologies they inherited, or theorized in the Birmingham School's subculture-resistance model (Hall and Jefferson 1975; Hebdige 1976). Different from these totalizing readings, I will show that it is through the multiple forms of socio-cultural mediation that they have developed such tastes and have formed a much-shared sensibility of not fitting in within the current Chinese society. This cultural taste and concomitant feelings are further turned to a productive framework for these urban youth to articulate the problems in their everyday lives and find their own solutions to the tensions they feel in social lives. We will also see how such a framework is used by *wenyi* youth to distance themselves from their peers, who are considered non-independent in terms of cultural tastes and ways of life-making.

Chapter 4 looks at the linguistic production of genres and sociality in live musical performances. This chapter starts from an observation that the blossoming of alternative music scenes has also witnessed the transformation of "music ideologies," which I define as a set of beliefs, feelings, and reflexive understandings of music that guide related cultural practices and produce new practitioners. I will further explore the ways in which music ideologies strategically mediate between musical preferences, the politics of cultural imaginations, and the production of sociality in both the musical and non-musical worlds. This chapter specifically discusses how the boundary between rock-based independent music and experimental music is established through varying forms of sociality encouraged in different music ideologies. I will show that in contrast to the seemingly autonomous status indexed by the notion of "experimental," practices

organized and mediated by this experimental music ideology generate remarkable interpersonal closeness among young musicians.

1.5 Methods and Fieldwork Experience

The writing of this thesis is based on six-months of fieldwork conducted with a variety of participants in Beijing's alternative music scenes in 2013 and 2014.² I interviewed a group of twenty-six people, including eight music fans (six females, two males), fourteen musicians (eleven males, three females), and two other insiders of the local music circle (one male, one female). Most of the interviews were semi-structured, lasting for more than one hour in a face-to-face pattern. In addition, I participated in more than thirty concerts held in XP, a venue for independent music and my major site, and other bars and some outdoor sites. I also lived in the Drum Tower area for over two months to immerse myself in the everyday lives of my interviewees. By doing so, I had many informal conversations with them in daily activities other than music. In order to familiarize with background of the musician, I read the media archives provided by Maybe Mars, an indie music company located in the Drum Tower area. During and after my fieldwork, I also collected some posts and posters circulating on the Internet as additional textual information to increase the coverage of data.

Ethnographic writing is a process consisting of multi-layered representations. In contemporary book-length ethnographies, it is not uncommon to see authors' reflections on their representation of the fields. Oftentimes, this work is done by analytically accounting for their interactions with people in the field throughout the text. Given the limited length of a Master Thesis, however, I found it not particularly effective to

² The first and primary part of fieldwork was conducted between May and August 2013, the second part between December 2013 and January 2014, and the third one between June and August 2014.

organize the chapters through a continuous storytelling format. In order to balance between the integrity of descriptive narration and the clarity of academic argumentation, I offer in the following sections a brief account of my fieldwork experience. By incorporating this part to the introduction, I am not only interested in directing the readers' attention towards a plain re-enactment of ethnographic particulars presented in written forms. A more important concern is to provide more grounded and intimate senses of the spaces and people that can help contextualize the discussions in next few chapters. In particular, I will show how the process in which I entered the field and built rapport with my participants reflects some characteristic features of the people and music that will be discussed in this thesis.

1.5.1 Author's Positionality

Grown up in Beijing as a native Mandarin speaker, I had no language barrier to overcome throughout the research. Before the fieldwork, I already had a general understanding of the research topic due to my previous personal experience. I have been an active participant of China's underground music scene for more than eight years. From 2005 to 2012, I was the editor-in-chief of *Fan'er* (《范儿》), an independent music magazine that I established in high school. By 2012, this magazine had distributed seventeen issues, with a circulation of over 8,000 in total, to more than fifteen Chinese universities and high schools. Because of this experience of publishing, I was able to get in touch with music fans from different places across China and to gain updated and first-hand knowledge of the growing fandom of Chinese alternative music. My former dual-identity as both a music fan and an independent publisher greatly facilitated my access to young participants, since some of them were the readers of the magazine, and others were

both the authors of it and my close friends. Because of this advantage, the interviews with music fans were conducted successfully with valuable in-depth discussion on many issues. However, at the beginning of the fieldwork, I barely had any personal connections with the musicians I proposed to interview and had almost no idea about their interpersonal relations. In a nutshell, I found myself standing in a borderline between an insider of one group and an outsider of the other.

1.5.2 Xiao Hu

My initial research was greatly facilitated by Xiao Hu, who kindly introduced me to the record company and some of the musicians. A junior at Beijing Normal University, Xiao Hu had been working part-time for nearly two years at Maybe Mars, an independent music company to which most of my interviewees were affiliated. Unlike most university students in Beijing, Xiao Hu chose not to live on campus. This unconventional decision arose my curiosity of the mentality and personal politics of space involved in her “moving out,” which was further developed into interview questions I asked other young fans in university.

In her tiny apartment with no peer spectators or supervision from the educational system, Xiao Hu was able to withdraw from the sense of being watched and get away from her college roommates, who often commented on her “problematic” uniqueness. She also chose to share the apartment with someone with similar musical preferences. Therefore, her roommate would not be bothered when she started to play Noise Rock music loudly on her speakers at 12am because he had just returned from a death metal show and was temporarily deaf. If Xiao Hu does not hate inhaling smoke, then no one

hates her when she lights up her first cigarette of the day in bed after she wakes up on a Sunday afternoon. Life can be as bizarre as she wants, at least in this private space.

Students like Xiao Hu are often seen as deviants by China's universities in which diligence is often highly valued and many students work hard to achieve various goals framed by their schools. Many students, however, go in the opposite direction by living an unprecedented entertainment-focused life in which they spend quite a lot of time playing computer games, watching TV series, and studying only before end-of-term exams for a couple of days. Among college students like Xiao Hu, the earnest ones often do not care to spend their valuable college years in either of these two opposing ways. They rather prefer to be critical thinkers with more independent ideas. In Chapter 3, I will examine how the formation of this attitude towards life is mediated by cultural tastes and how musical practices can significantly mobilize such tastes into actions in everyday life.

1.5.3 Zoomin Night and Deng Chenglong

During the first few weeks of my fieldwork, I spent most of my time preparing potential interviews by reading available news, journal articles, and other forms of textual information. At the same time, I joined more than ten concerts held in XP, including five organized by Zoomin Night, an experimental music project launched by the organizer Zhu Wenbo with the support of Maybe Mars. Up to the end of my summer fieldwork in 2014, Zoomin Night has been held in every Tuesday night for five years since 2009.

My initial strategy was to participate in Zoomin Night's concerts invisibly – it seemed to me that to correctly and respectfully study these musicians and their music, I should at the first place familiarize myself with their live performances. However, I quickly learned that there was no way to hide myself among the audiences – oftentimes,

the total number of participants is less than ten, with three to four performers of that day, about five of their friends and other musicians, and another guy who showed up every time but no one knew, which is me (see Figure 1.1). The oddness of my existence was not only perceived by myself. In early June 2013, I first introduced myself to Deng Chenglong, the manager and sound mixer of XP, saying that I am an anthropology student who is doing a research on experimental music. After I said I was *very* interested in experimental music, improvisational performance, and noise, twenty-five year-old Deng nodded with slight frown, and commented “Oh that’s good, good... but I saw you left during Yang Yang’s performance last week.” “Well...” I was stuck for a few seconds, thinking how to react to the trenchant remark uttered in a calm voice from an insider-observer with such a good memory. The fact is that I did leave early, partly because that was the first time when I was exposed to harsh noise performance like Yang Yang’s, which did challenge my open-mindedness to sounds, and partly because I was in a hurry catching up the last train back to my then home twenty kilometers away. What I revealed to Deng was merely the latter part, and I confessed the former only after we became friends later.

Considering the spectatorship of Zoomin’ Night, as well as the interpersonal relations between musicians I was managed to explore in subsequent fieldwork, my short interaction with Deng indexes two themes that I will discuss in Chapter 4. First, the fact that Deng noticed me shows how small the circle is, which importantly conditions the modes of interaction between musicians and influences how they produce music together. Second, his suspicion that I was not “very” interested in the music should not only be understood in terms of his inner intentionality or the micro-politics between us. Instead,

as I will show with more details, it suggests that mutual familiarity with regard to music are highly valued among experimental musicians, which constitute the music ideology that underlines both music production and the ways of talking about music. Combining them together, I will show that the pleasure of engaging in experimental music practice derives not only from musical practices, but also from the interpersonal closeness constructed through these practices.



Figure 1.1 Vavabond (Wei Wei) performing at Zoomin' Night (XP, 2013.6.18 Photo by author)

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW AND PROBLEMATICS

2.1 Underground Sounds: The Social Positioning of Rock Music in China

The discourse of rock music first appeared in China's public cultural milieu in the late 1980s, a decade after Deng Xiaoping's socioeconomic reform. At that time, the country had already witnessed the nation-wide development of Chinese popular music in a way that had been impossible in the cultural politics of Maoist socialism. In the 1980s, popular songs from Taiwan and Hong Kong were notably influential due to their linguistic, aesthetic and cultural accessibility (Moskowitz 2010: 21). At the same time, the state-owned institutions and affiliated musicians had started producing their works (Jin 2002). In this period, the state was still maintaining its supervision over the both the production and distribution of popular music (Jin 2002; Jones 1992; Sun 2012). This state-guided cultural policy made popular music in China a highly politicized field with a variety of ideological concerns (Jones 1992: 3). In this context, early musicians' practice of rock music is consistently characterized as being full of hardship due to the aesthetic, institutional, and ideological challenges, from both the public and the state (Baranovitch 2003; de Kloet 2010; Campbell 2011; Jones 1992; Sun 2012; Wang 1995; Zhao 1992).

The state of austerity experienced by these practitioners (Campbell 2011; Jones 1992), together with the rebellious unconventionality by which their musical production was framed by intellectuals and critics (Sun 2012: 21-24), inscribed a long lasting discursive dichotomy—mainstream and underground—onto the rock subculture and its

successors. This dichotomous social positioning of rock music in China's public culture is crucial in the sense that it helps create a clear framework for the articulation of the uniqueness of rock music by linking its musicality to sociality. Among the socio-musical trajectories of this framework, "resistance" and "authenticity" are two primary tropes to which much scholarly attention has been paid (Baranovitch 2003; de Kloet 2010; Jones 1992; Sun 2012). Andrew Jones (1992) uses the term "genre" in his pioneering work to capture the differences between the then emerging rock music and those more popular ones. In his comprehensive definition, genre is "the whole constellation of institutional structures, activities, individual sensibilities, discursive practices and ideological aims by which any given type of popular music is produced, performed, disseminated, discussed, and used by its audiences" (Jones 1992: 3). In other words, genre is a much more about ideology than musicality. Jones shows that to the first generation of Chinese rockers, the central ideological concern about rock music is that it is an "authentic self-expression and emotional release in the face of oppression" (91). Here, the "authentic self-expression" embraced by rockers derives from a radical understanding that songs produced by popular culture industry are artificial in terms of contents, production, and ways of performing. The "oppression," on the other hand, refers to various forms of restriction in social life. In the late 1980s, China's society faced a growing tension between progressive economic reform and relatively static change of political structure and cultural politics. In this context, although the number of practitioners at the core of rock subculture was very small (Campbell 2011; Jones 1992), their music was made use of by a larger group of young people, especially educated youth in the city, as a way to express political discontent.³ Sun Yi's work advances this

³ Cui Jian's "Nothing to My Name," for example, became the anthem of student protestors in the 1989

argument by emphasizing the reflexivity and subjectivity of rock music in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Sun asserts that the subjectivity involved in songs produced by state-supported musicians promotes a transfigured collectivism, even though the themes in these pieces are expressed from an individual's perspective (Sun 2012: 52-53). The songs from Hong Kong and Taiwan, on the other hand, primarily manifest a subjectivity of desire and emotion (54). Sun argues that unlike these works, rock music cultivates reflexive subjects by providing room for brave and honest dialogues with the concrete social reality of China (55-56).

2.2 Crisis or Productivity? The Transformation of Chinese Rock

The themes of resistance and authenticity also organize many academic discussions of the “fate” of Chinese rock (Baranovitch 2003; Sun 2012; Wang 2007). Baranovitch (2003) notes that the blossom of Beijing rock started to fade away when it reached a climax in the early 1990s, not soon after the students' protest in Tiananmen in 1989 was crushed by the government. According to him, it was a nationwide cynicism subsequent to the 1989 movement – individual efforts can never shake the state's iron fists – that stagnated the acceptance of rock ideology (Baranovitch 2003: 43-44). Wang Qian (2007) discusses in her dissertation the “crisis” of Chinese rock in the similar framework.

A problem of this line of interpretation is a simplified understanding that rock music is primarily a means for resistance – it falls when it fails to resist. De Kloet challenges this assumption based on his research on China's alternative music scenes from 1997 to 2008. He argues that in opposition to the “fall” suggested by Baranovitch,

Tiananmen Incident to show their dissatisfaction with the government, although Cui himself refuses many politicized interpretation of his songs.

Chinese rock music was transformed profoundly from a monolithic ideological “genre” (in Andrew Jones’ term) to the more diversified “scenes” based on *both* musical styles and ideological concerns (de Kloet, 39-40). At the same time, what functions importantly in this process of dissemination was still a quite rigid “rock mythology,” which consists of “a set of narratives which produce rock as a distinct music world that is, first and foremost, authentic, but also subcultural, masculine, rebellious and (counter) political” (de Kloet 2010: 26). By highlighting the central role of rock mythology, de Kloet frames rock music as a “hard culture form” (Appadurai 1996), which “changes those who are socialized into it more readily than it is itself changed” (Appadurai 1996: 90). In this framework, those new scenes are not independently new, but are “authenticated” in reference to the productive yet inflexible rock mythology. This approach enables de Kloet to offer a more dynamic analysis of the (re)production, instead of the products (songs, lyrics, texts), of rock culture. Furthermore, he challenges the fundamental dichotomies (official-unofficial; mainstream-underground) that shaped the understandings of Chinese rock subculture in a long time. Drawing on a Foucaultian perception of power (Foucault 1976), he shows that the state censorship can be a productive incentive in the reproduction of mythologized rock subculture. Many bands, interpolated by this rock mythology, write songs that further strengthen it. At the same time, record company can market their products by profiling the musicians as anti-mainstream subjects, and consequently make profit from constant citation of such rock mythology (de Kloet 2010). De Kloet’s approach is informative in that he does not depict the picture of “Chinese rock” as rise or fall holistically, but explores how the solid

discourse and ideology of rock music *transform* the existing styles and *produce* new ones in China's changing society.

2.3 The Emergence of "Independent Music" and Other Independent Cultures

De Kloet's work well characterizes the period between the mid 1990s and the late 2000s in which rock subculture was spread to the youth cultures in many Chinese cities, but the noteworthy transition of the scenes after 2008 calls for some different interpretations.

Since the late 2000s, "independent music" has greatly replaced its predecessor, "underground rock," in daily language regarding any alternative musical practices. As the term independent music is cited, it usually refers to a musically inclusive meta-genre that points to any musical practice that is perceived to be different from mainstream mode of producing, performing, and appreciating music. While such meta-genre is still very rock-based in terms of musicality and inherits many narratives from rock discourses, it greatly de-emphasizes the musico-ideological unification as is suggested in rock mythology. Although the affects understood as typical to rock, such as angry, are still being felt and reproduced in current independent music scenes, songs established upon the rock and roll trope of resistance, especially those that proclaim drastic changes of given social situations, are much less seen in this period. In contemporary independent music worlds, music ideologies should be read in plural forms that have altogether reworked and deconstructed the singular rock mythology.

The shift to "independent" in alternative music scenes belongs to a more general trend for "independent cultures" in contemporary China. Much like what has happened in the domain of music, other forms of amateur or non-institutional artistic-cultural

practices, such as filmmaking, drama performing, and grassroots publishing, are increasingly being entitled with “independent,” instead of “underground,” during the same time period. Situated in these transitions occurred over the past few years is a reflection much shared among various kinds of practitioners: even though the majority of them still regard what they do as a category differing from the mainstream, their sense of being intentionally excluded from the open field of cultural practices is greatly lowered. It is this relatively higher diversity that has increasingly dissembled the context of using “underground.”

To examine this shift to independent cultures and its participants, music is a pivotal focus due to its greatest popularity among different kinds of practices. In Chapter 3, I will draw upon the emergence of “*wenyi* youth” and their stories about music to look at this trend with more profound analysis.

2.4 Between the Musical and the Social: Mediations of Taste, Subjectivity, and Sociality

Much academic discussion of China’s music-scape takes music as a medium for reflecting, articulating, and producing social meanings (Baranovitch 2003; Chow and de Kloet 2013; de Kloet 2010; Jones 1992, 2001; Moskowitz 2010). Baranovitch (2003) traces the history of China’s popular music from 1978 to 1997, arguing that popular music in China opens a thriving public space for the negotiation of broad social issues, such as gender, ethnicity, and politics once rigid in the preceding communist era. Moskowitz (2010) focuses on the transnational production of Mandarin popular music, showing how popular music effectively constructs young people’s understanding of intimate relationship and gender issues. Chow and de Kloet (2013) emphasize both the production and the products of popular music, showing how the locality of Hong Kong is

significantly shaped through Hong Kong pop and how the “micro-politics” in musical practices challenge the homogeneous form of Chineseness favored by the central government.

In China’s alternative music scenes, two forms of mediation are vital to understand its characteristics from emic perspectives. The first kind concentrates on the process in which western rock subculture enters into China’s cultural domain. Sun shows Chinese musicians’ attempts to re-authenticate rock in China, revealing the cultural anxiety they had in distinguish their works from existing western counterparts (Sun 2012). De Kloet focuses on the “cut-tapes/CDs” (打口盤) smuggled in from western countries and explains how these disorderly imported objects cultivated the preferences for and perceptions of rock music for a whole generation of Chinese rockers in the 1990s (de Kloet 2010). A second kind of mediation is one that links musical practices with the production of self and identity. Jones’ early inquiry (1992) showcases a conscious self-making through music: the rise of a rock ideology witnessed a simultaneous incentive for a new way of living. In de Kloet’s investigation of China’s “post-1980 generation” (八零后), he notes that music is “an important ingredient in the constant production and reproduction of the self” (de Kloet 2010: 140). He argues that localized cultural currents within alternative music scenes are important in claiming generational difference and are key components of the identity politics of contemporary Chinese youth (2010: 25, 154). Jeroen Groenewegen (2011) draws on an approach that centers on the theatricality in musical performances, discussing the multiple ways by which rock musicians perform their identities on stage.

In the following chapters, I will continue the analysis of mediation in contemporary Chinese independent music scene. Chapter 3 focuses on urban Chinese youth grown up in the 2000s and discusses the ways in which they articulate the tension they experience between cultural imaginations inspired by musical preferences and everyday life perceived as relatively uneventful. In Chapter 4, I draw on ethnographic specificities about the language use in musical performances to show how a certain genre within alternative music scenes is produced through the textual mediation of ideological concerns that shape a mode of participation specific to this genre.

2.5 Prosperity on the Ground: A Catch of Post-Olympic Independent Music Scene

Jeroen de Kloet emotionally expresses his surprise on the huge transformation of China's underground music scene from 1997 to 2008, when he was exposed in the crowded, fashionable, and well-organized Modern Sky Music Festival held in Beijing (de Kloet 2010). I read de Kloet's encounter as an outset of a new era of China's alternative music scenes in which cultural currents once perceived to live underground have been increasingly exposed, incorporated, and reproduced in an open field. This process urges us to think the shifting relation between musical practices and social conditions, as well as the young subjects engaged in and are produced in this process.

Over the past decade, the opportunities for participating in once marginalized rock subculture have significantly increased. Many new occurrences in this period mark an evident transition of rock music from a rigidly perceived underground subculture to a series of dispensations that intervene public culture in many ways. Significantly, three characteristics are noticeable in these trends. First, the tension between alternative music and state power has considerably relieved due to the changing policy context. Although

the state keeps positioning itself in official speech as the leading force China's culture, it has greatly changed its way of intervening cultural production on policy level. Since 2007, Chinese government has been promoting "cultural and creative industries" nationwide, framing it as a new field of growth in terms of both economy and the soft power of the country. This national call has received positive responses from local governments, which have become more cooperative with independent cultural workers and institutions by facilitating the arrangement of art and cultural events. For example, the number of outdoor music festivals has skyrocketed at a rate unexpected to many older rock fans. Midi Music Festival, once the annual utopia of underground rockers and considered China's Woodstock, has changed in merely ten years from the holy playground of the Chinese rock diaspora, to one site among hundreds of music festivals all around the country. In this case of music festivals, bureaucracies have become much more active in putting through musical events, as opposed to using defensive strategies that had been taken for granted for a long time.⁴ In a nutshell, as the governmental strategies transform, a closer alliance between the state and the "non-mainstream" culture is emerging, which challenges some of the assumptions in the previous discourse of rock.

In addition, as is described in Chapter 1, the prosperity of independent music, as a frontline of the rising independent cultures, has been overtly incorporated into the urban landscapes and commercial arrangements. An illustrative example is the popularity of the plainly designed navy shirt with blue and white stripes that used to be standard interior dress in People's Liberation Army Navy. In the early 1990s, pioneering punk rocker He Yong adopted this iconic cloth in his stage performance, restyling the classic dress in communist era into a music subculture characterized by masculine rebellion and anti-

⁴ See more in Zhang Wuyi's research on China's outdoor music festivals (Zhang 2011; 2013).

commercial spirit. Since then, navy shirt became a stable choice among underground musicians, whose musical genres range from grunge (such as Xie Tianxiao) to urban folk (such as Wan Xiaoli). In the first few years of the 2000s in Beijing, it was fairly safe to identify those who wore navy shirts as rock fans, but this indexicality has almost disappeared in the recent five or so years due to its widely circulation in non-music fields. In places like Nan Luogu Xiang, the navy shirt is as common as any souvenirs, and many visitors who wear it do not engage with the music scenes like it used to be.

Lastly, accompanying with the actual participations mentioned above, the virtual interactions centering on independent music in both the Internet and offline media grew more quickly and have permeated through many young people's everyday life. For instance, Douban, an online social network established in 2005, has become the major platform for cataloguing albums one has listened to, discussing music and bands, and announcing live musical events. It could be argued that the expanding music-scape in the 2010s is fundamentally made possible by this maturing "media-scape" (Appadurai 1996). As I will show in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, many aesthetic communities are formed through this media-scape because it importantly links face-to-face interaction and lived musical experience with discursive fields in which styles and ideologies of music are reproduced.

2.6 Context Beyond Music: Post-socialist China and The Social Lives of Urban Youth

The state's top-down incentive on cultural industry does not directly lead to the thriving of independent music, and the media-scape's construction of the music-scape cannot be reduced to any causality. It is also inadequate to read the commodification of the sign "independence" only as the mainstream culture's "incorporation" (Hebdige

1976) of underground subculture. In these threads of a transforming youth culture, it is critical to notice the basis of subjects – the real participants and their ways of participating. The fact that these subjects are not produced overnight only in the field of music makes it important to situate their personal experience and everyday life, with respect to musical and social alike, into the changes that have taken in China’s society over the past few decades. In what follows, I will provide such a social context in which the trend for independence and its advocates are fostered.

2.6.1 Reform Era, Market Economy, Consumerism, and the Rise of Urban Middle Class

In the late 1970s, Deng Xiaoping’s rise to power marked a new era of China in which he enacted a drastic transition of governing strategy. In Mao’s era, the closed economy system and continuous political movements made China an egalitarian, but isolated low-income, country. Unlike his predecessor Mao Zedong, Deng prompted his reform by rethinking Mao’s governance centering around domestic class-struggle which he thought “had outlived its usefulness, and the risks of creating inequality within China and dependence on capitalist countries were outweighed by the potential gain” (Gerth 2010: 7). Deng put forward China’s join of global economy as he reconfigured domestic mode of production. The country gradually moved from planned economy towards market economy, but the latter is often read as “semi-free” because the government maintains its political influence in various ways. This situation is officially articulated as “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” while from another perspective it could also be read as a “neoliberalism as an exception” (Ong 2006).

As a noticeable outcome of Deng’s reform, consumerism emerges in people’s everyday life. The increase of domestic products has created a thriving retail business by

which Chinese acquired an identity as consumers. The new rich in the 1990s, who first attained wealth in the 1980s, started to envision and practice what is believed to be middle-class lifestyles such as buying cars and consuming more luxury goods (Gerth 2010: 45; 93-95). The government's growing stimulation of purchasing also speeded up these changes (Gerth 2010: 100).

Another prominent phenomenon in reform era is the discernible social stratification. China's urban middle-class rises in this context. As sociologist Li Cheng notes, middle class groups in contemporary China primarily belong to the following three clusters:

- An economic cluster (including private sector entrepreneurs, urban small businesspeople, rural industrialists and rich farmers, foreign and domestic joint-venture employees, and stock and real estate speculators)
- A political cluster (government officials, office clerks, state sector managers, and lawyers)
- A cultural and educational cluster (academics and educators, media personalities, public intellectuals, and think tank scholars)⁵

Li's summary is comprehensive enough to sketch out the image of China's middle class from the perspective of occupation. In terms of income level, it is less likely to provide such a neat description of who is middle-class in China. In the increasing chasm between the rich and the poor, those who match the economic status of the "middle" in nationwide statistics, only take a small portion of the whole population, and are actually

⁵ Li 2009

much wealthier than the lower incomers (Li 2009). Within the residents of major cities, however, the word “middle” makes better sense due to a less divergence of income level, house ownership, and everyday lifestyles in urban areas (Zhang 2010). In other words, “middle-class” is valid term if we confine the scope of discussion to cities in contemporary China.

2.6.2 *Only Children*

China’s One-Child Policy (OCP) launched in 1979 is perhaps the most far-reaching biopolitical project over the past decades considering the profound effects it has produced to the world population. Due to its epoch-making influence on Chinese demographics, OCP has also been principle lens through which varying analysts look at China’s post-socialist generation. As only children born after OCP have gradually constituted the majority of China’s population, professionals in media and academia have become eager to capture “generational characteristics” of these individuals. The narratives in media profiles following this agenda are often confined in generalized ways, which more or less essentialize the understanding of this generation. For example, “China’s Me Generation,” an article published in *Time Magazine* in 2007, argues in a pessimistic tone that China’s only children are more individualistic and less interested in political issues than previous generations of Chinese children.⁶ An earlier commentary from CNN remarks that members of this generation are less competent than their parents in terms of social skills, but are creative in constructing their own culture.⁷ Variations within Chinese youth are also overlooked in these interpretations, as well as pieces appeared in scientific journals. In January 2013, *Science* published an article named

⁶ <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1675626,00.html>.

⁷ http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2004/10/04/8186784/index.htm

“China’s Little Emperors: The Behavioral Impacts of China’s One-Child Policy” (Cameron 2013). This research compares a large number of participants born right after the OCP with their counterparts born just before the policy, noting that although they are in the same age group, the former is less competitive, less likely to carry out in pro-social behaviors, less trustworthy, and less likely to trust others. This research proves evidence for the behavioral differences created by the OCP, it would be problematic, however, to use these conclusions to formulate a panoramic profile of post-OCP generation. This is because terms such as “pro-social,” “competitive,” and “trust” are operationalized in specific settings of psychological experiments decontextualized from social life. Although it is tempting to pin down a certain number of generational characteristics, without carefully discussing how these attributes can be re-contextualized back into real world, conclusions like the ones listed above would mistakenly obscure the complexity of social lives experienced by this generation.

Ethnographic studies provide in-depth understandings of China’s post-socialist generation by situating their micro-lives into broader social changes. Fong (2006) focuses on China’s educational system and analyzes how only children are entangled in socio-psychological webs of growing up, getting “modernized,” and aspiring to success in a post-socialist China. She uses several detailed cases to illustrate that “spoiled” teenagers also face high expectations from their parents and explains how these teenagers deal with this tension (Fong 2006: 155-177). Jing (2000) collects a variety of firsthand accounts of food consumption and shows how post-socialist Chinese children and their families are involved in China’s globalization process. Liu (2011) sheds light on contemporary Chinese youth’s online entertainment, exploring the everyday lives of young adults in

urban China. Taken together, these works greatly demonstrate the diversity of China's post-socialist situation, and how it encounters, influences, and is experienced by the Chinese post-socialist generation.

The sudden presence of a large number of only children is new to both China and the world. From a diachronic perspective, it cannot be denied that this nationwide demographic transition has brought about extraordinary impact on the psychology and social behavior of China's younger generation. The "4-2-1 structure" (four grandparents, two parents, one child) extensively emerged in Chinese families, for example, has profoundly altered the power relations within these families and gave birth to many "little emperors" who gain seemingly excessive amounts of attention from their parents and grandparents. At the same time, it is also important to look at this generation synchronically by juxtaposing the OCP with other contemporaneous structural transitions ensued after Deng's reform.

2.6.3 Compulsory Education, Education for Quality, and the Expanded Higher Education

Education, as a pivotal force in the social production of young subjects, provides a useful angle for understanding China's youth culture in its post-socialist situation. With a national impulse to develop economy, in the reform era China has shifted to a knowledge economy. The intelligence has been increasingly emphasized accompanying with the government's growing investment in education. The Compulsory Education Law launched in the early 1980s, for example, is such a national policy aiming at popularizing education. Due to this law, children nationwide receive an obligatory nine-year education from elementary to middle school. The state promotes this policy by decreasing the cost of education and ensuring that parents send their children to school. The compulsory

education achieves significant success in that the literacy rate of China had risen to 90 percent, yet its side effects, such as exam-centrism, have been criticized since not long after it was initiated. For example, because National College Entrance Examination, an obligatory access to higher education for most students, is full of brutal competition due to the limited seats in universities, many students are overly exposed to various exams since elementary schools. Such long and tedious training turns many of them into skillful test takers who, unfortunately, are incompetent in other non-evaluative situations. Side effects of as such have received much attention from domestic critics, as they contradict the fundamental goal of enhancing quality of the whole population. Throughout the domestic pedagogic debate from the 1980s to 1990s, Chinese students' "lack of creativity and individuality" had been a heated topic (Kipnis 2010: 5), and as a reference, western teenagers and China's more "developed" neighbors were believed to have more positive attributes and were often quoted in popular narratives to draw attention to Chinese education's "backwardness."

In this context, *suzhi* education, or Education for Quality (素质教育), came on the stage in 1999 as national policy claimed as fundamental to the country's development.⁸ Continuing the biopolitical agenda of Compulsory Education, Education for Quality was launched with a more explicit intention to improve the general "quality" of Chinese people. The notion of *suzhi*, closest English translation being "quality," is perceived by many contemporary Chinese as a quantifiable attribute embodied in individuals that can be improved through education (Anagnost 2004, 2008; Kipnis 2007, 2010; Moskowitz 2013).

⁸ For more details, see Suzhi Education Task Team (2006).

In the most practical sense, *Suzhi* education stresses that students' exam burden be reduced and encourages their extracurricular activities. This call is resonated by many of my interviewees with a memory that, at the turn of 21st century, the very end of their elementary education, their schools suddenly started a campaign of cultivating students' *suzhi* through a variety of activities addition to regular coursework. At the time, in the discourse of *suzhi*, the term is codified as multifarious competencies: performing well in examination is *suzhi*, running faster is *suzhi*, playing the piano professionally is *suzhi* too. However, criticisms towards the credibility of this reform have never stopped because of the lack of educational specificities in its promotion (Ye 2011) and the fact that numerous outside-classroom activities are actually incorporated into the test-based evaluative system (Shi and Liu 2007).

In Moskowitz's analysis, *suzhi* reflects the state, media, and social elites' efforts to "encourage its citizenry to be industrious, to seek education, and to behave in a genteel fashion" (Moskowitz 2013: 71). Not only could *suzhi* be drawn upon to discipline children and young students, it could also be used in deriding the "unrefined" aesthetics and manners the nouveau riche. (Moskowitz 71, 100; see also in Osburg 2013). This observation corroborates Anagnost's (2004) argument that *suzhi* has become a penetrating concept-metaphor as the term "value" does in Marx's political economy (191). From a Marxian perspective, she argues that such way of coding the human body has justified the exploitation of some individuals by defining them as having lower *suzhi* and therefore extracting their surplus value (193). In the discourse of employment, for example, college graduates are thought as having higher *suzhi*, which explains why they are more easily to find superior jobs. In contrast, rural immigrant workers are often

depicted as possessing lower *suzhi*, and naturally, they are only attracted to less promising jobs that only require unspecialized physical labor (Anagnost 2004: 192). *Suzhi* is thus a language used to reify individual differentiation and justify China's increasing social stratification. Kipnis critically reads this last point and notes that in China, the spreading of *suzhi* discourse cannot be discussed only in a neoliberalism framework (Kipnis 2007). This is particularly because Chinese traditions of self-cultivation and other sources of competition beyond the logic of neoliberalism are equally crucial in contextualizing *suzhi* discourse in Chinese society (Kipnis 2007: 394).

In the field of education, what is essential is an understanding that *suzhi* can be manufactured by external forces. Some of these concerns are more typically neoliberal which treat enhancing *suzhi* primarily as an economic project – parents avidly buying their children into better schools and blindly funding them in after-school skill training courses fall into this category (see more in Anagnost 2004). Others have less to do with a utilitarian rationale and are more culturally invested with the purposes of cultivating individual morality and good virtues. Fostering traditionally embraced Confucian masculinity through the training of the game “Go” can be classified as such (see more in Moskowitz 2013).

Another generational phenomenon experienced by post-socialist Chinese youth is the significantly increased chance of receiving higher education. In 1999, the year as *Suzhi* Education was prompted, the Chinese government started to expand the scale of higher education by offering more positions for high-school graduates. From 1977 to 1999, the enrollment rate was extremely low — in these two decades, 60 million people took the college entrance exam, but only 1 million, approximately 1.7 percent, were

actually enrolled (Lin & Sun 2009: 217). From 1990 to 2005, however, China's higher education enrollment increased by almost 800 percent (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2006). In 2009, for example, approximately 23.3 percent of high school graduates attended universities (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2009).

In today's China, like it was throughout the country's history, the importance of education lies in its substantial role in self-cultivation, as well as the social mobility it promises. As it has become easier to receive a Bachelor degree, higher education experience is now a basic requirement for most well paid middle-class jobs, especially in urban settings (Lin and Sun 2009: 219). It is also estimated that current higher education expansion will result in an even larger middle-class in the future (Lin and Sun 2009: 213).

2.6.4 Cultural Consumption and Media

Unlike the contemporary Chinese metropolitan teenagers for whom ongoing cultural trends everywhere are easy to obtain, post-socialist Chinese urban youth grown up in the 1990s were not exposed to such accessibility all the time. They instead experienced a process in which global pop culture shifted from expensive products and abstract signs from afar to economically and culturally attainable things. What their parents are unfamiliar with and their succeeding generation take granted for, such as western fast food, computer games, and music shops, have been accepted as regular elements in their everyday lives only gradually in perceivable pace. For China, this phenomenon reflects a condensed process of "catching-up," which, in the tone of the developmentalist discourse, seems to be only an impersonal summary. Yet for these

individuals, concrete and affective personal feelings about “change” pervaded their day-to-day lives as they grew up.

A key characteristic of the post-socialist generation is an act of assimilating new media in which cultural products are circulated. In terms of the medium of music, independent music fans born in the 1980s has completely experienced in their teenager years the recession of radio, the prevalence and disappearance of tape cassettes, the rises and falls of CDs, and the popularization of mp3 downloading software. Similarly, their ways of acquiring music knowledge have shifted from through radio programs and printed magazines, to BBS, and to Web 2.0 social networks.

In addition, their cultural practices are substantially availed by the enormous grey areas in China’s cultural market in which illegally reproduced cultural products circulate at large. Compared to imported pieces with official sanction, movies and music distributed in this way have a much greater diversity and are more affordable to young consumers. An interesting result of this chaotically mediated downpour of cultural flows is that post-socialist generation has a strikingly hybrid repertoire of art-cultural knowledge with mediocre understanding. This uncommon background, as I will further discuss in Chapter 3, is crucial for cultivating a cultural taste that is specific to this generation.

2.6.4 Urban Youth in Post-socialist China: A Profile

So far I have outlined a general profile for China’s post-socialist youth grown up in urban middle-class families. As only children in core families, they take the whole share of parenting resource, which in itself keeps growing as the rise of middle class. Compared to their parents’ generation, they are able to hold the status as an economically

unproductive youth much longer. Extended education availed by state policy guarantees a longer time in school, and in their extracurricular time, the greater income of their parents provides them with more allocable pocket money for entertainments. In their most sensitive adolescence, this generation has been always exposed to new forms of media and has learned to manipulate them afterwards.

Two contexts about university students are of particular relevance to the current thesis, for the broad emergence of this group has set up the demographic foundation of creative cultural production and consumption in current city landscapes. First, although the expanded higher education is often critiqued for its lowered quality, it has created a mass population of qualified consumers in the market of pop culture. The once elite-dominated college culture is thus replaced by a commonly shared pool of everyday entertainments, which no longer requires particularly high cultural competence. Second, the fact that entering university is easier witnesses a concentration of China's young people who move to cities for education. In China, because universities are located densely in big cities such as Beijing or Shanghai, the expansion of higher education has successfully brought together vigorous juveniles from different places with an actual sense of urban space. With lessened burden of exams, and the suddenly disappeared control from their parents, these young students become more socially mobile subjects open to a range of possible cultural practices. It is these highly mobile and well-educated cultural actors who have cultivated a blooming participant basis for independent cultures.

In next chapter, I will draw upon Chinese urban youth's personal history of listening and making music and offer a more ethnographically detailed description of their cultural preferences and ways of enjoying music. By contextualizing post-socialist

urban youth's everyday life in terms of their socioeconomic conditions, family structure, and education, I will show how the social transformations in post-socialist China cultivated the emergence of this youth culture, especially the “*wenyi* youth” in the cities. Additionally, I will analyze the relation between their listening experiences and everyday lives. We will see how music constructs a new dichotomy between “ideal worlds” and “real life” and how a new personage of Chinese youth is being formed and self-articulated with crucial reference to cultural tastes.

CHAPTER 3

INDEPENDENCE AT LARGE: CONTEMPORARY CHINA'S *WENYI* YOUTH AND THEIR CULTURAL PRACTICES

Introduction

Due to its comparatively high accessibility and ease in creating social interactions, music has been an important frontline of post-socialist Chinese youth's cultural practices, extending from the subcultural to the popular. Based on fieldwork conducted with independent music fans and practitioners in Beijing, this chapter aims to provide a subject-centered reading of the emerging popularized embrace of "independent cultures" among Chinese urban youth. Close attention is paid to the simultaneously risen discourse of "*wenyi* youth" ("artistic-cultural" youth), a phrase often used to describe young subjects in this vogue. Using "independence" and "*wenyi*" as two focal points, this chapter is organized around answering three sets of questions. The first set is more descriptive: what is *wenyi*, and who are *wenyi* youth? The second set revolves around the modes of participation and the social meanings of this trend: what kind of independence do *wenyi* youth enjoy, how do they enjoy, and finally, what does such participation mean to them in their everyday lives? The third set investigates the social formation of the embrace of independence as both a form of cultural taste and a rationale one uses to articulate broader issues beyond cultural preferences: why it is independent music transformed from earlier underground rock, instead of more "local" popular music, that provides space for problematizing reality? Why it is in this particular generation that

independent and *wenyi* are celebrated by a growing collection of urban youth? What are the socioeconomic processes in parallel to the translation of subcultural knowledge that give impetus to the birth of these young subjects?

3.1 The Arrival of Wenyi Youth

Among the scholarship concerning contemporary China's youth culture, an under-discussed phenomenon is the growth of a body of young social actors whose marked characteristic is the particular attention they pay to cultural preferences and their engagement in events whose participants share such preferences. By using the terms "cultural preference" or "cultural taste" in the context of Chinese youth culture, I mean aestheticized processes in pastimes in which one (a) selects and appreciates cultural-artistic objects, such as music and film, either through purchasing or non-economically exchanging, or (b) engages in cultural-artistic events, such as going to music concert or cinema, that offer fuller aesthetic experience. In public discourse, these youth are often referred to as *wenyi qingnian* (文艺青年), which literally means "artistic and cultural youth."

Wenyi qingnian consist the majority of the participants of independent cultures, which are believed to be outside the domain of mass-mediated kinds of popular culture, especially forms of practices based on music, film, photography, novels, and other near art or literature practices. Common categories within independent cultures include the enjoyment of rock-based alternative music, art or near art films that are not currently shown in mainstream cinemas, art exhibitions known a select small number of audiences, etc. It is interesting to notice that these practices, each requires very different specialty, can be semantically merged under the term "*wenyi*" or "independent" interchangeably.

This fact implies that there are some rather homogeneous ideological concerns about general style/ways of doing art/way of thinking shared by *wenyi qingnian*, regardless of what specific form of art or cultural activity one engages in. Additionally, as the forms of independent cultures actually belong to a specific spectrum, a relatively clear boundary can be drawn between practices enjoyed by *wenyi qingnian* and other subcultural practices simultaneously rising among Chinese youth, such as long-distance bicycling, cosplay performing, reading traditional Chinese classics, involving in popular religions, etc.

In general, *wenyi qingnian* age from their mid-teens to late twenties and primarily consist of urban college students. Like their urban peers, most of them are only children grown up in middle-class families that broadly emerged in post-socialist China in the 1990s. I select rock-based independent music as the focus in discussing *wenyi qingnian*, for this form of cultural practices is most accessible among others and hence has an arguably largest population.

The term *wenyi qingnian* does not translate directly into English. While *qingnian* needs no more elaboration in translation—it means “youth,” the term *wenyi* does not have a direct translation to English. Some of current translations, such as “cultured youth” and “artistic youth,” do not express the connotations of *wenyi* well. Although the word “hipster,” when used in contemporary United States, indexes similar social meanings as the use of *wenyi qingnian* in China does, I choose not to employ phrases like “Chinese hipster” as to avoid an impression that the latter derives from the former. With these concerns, I will use “*wenyi* youth” through the thesis after explaining the connotation of *wenyi* in the following paragraphs.

Wenyi can be read as a combination of two Chinese characters, *wen* (文) and *yi* (艺). *Wen* is a simpler way to refer to *wenhua* (文化), a general but weighty expression that means “culture” in contemporary Chinese; similarly, *yi* is a brief form of *yishu* (艺术), which stands for art. The combination of *wen* and *yi* to form *wenyi* is not a neologism specific to *wenyi qingnian*: in addition to its current popularity as an expression used in youth culture, *wenyi* has also been broadly used as an adjective to describe amateur-level artistic-cultural practices. These practices, such as a *wenyi yanchu* (*wenyi* performance, 文艺演出), *wenyi huodong* (*wenyi* event or activity, 文艺活动), and *wenyi wanhui* (*wenyi* gala, 文艺晚会), often refer to collectively organized public gatherings with the goal of entertaining. In these settings, those who perform onstage often have above-average skills in singing, dancing, playing instruments, or other forms of performing arts, and these shows are usually easy to appreciate for ordinary audiences. By contrast, performances named with *yishu* are considered to be more formal and professional. Thus, the term *wenyi* is lighter than either *wenhua* or *yishu* because it partially presents the formality and pleasurability involved in these two words. In the context of *wenyi* youth, *wenyi* inherits this connotation, forming a dual signification of either intellectualized joyfulness or enjoyable intellectuality. These two features, as I will demonstrate below, are crucial to understanding the cultural practices of *wenyi* youth.

Wenyi youth have received increasing attention in China’s public discourse in recent years. A search of “*wenyi qingnian*” in Google’s Chinese documented news reveals 43,700 items.⁹ This number is close to the result of *yaogun* (Chinese for “rock

⁹ Conducted Oct 16, 2014.

and roll”),¹⁰ a now well used word that appeared two decades earlier than *wenyi qingnian* in youth culture. Moreover, nearly every piece of news released between October 2014 and November 2014 with *wenyi qingnian* in its title does not explain this phrase in text. This suggests that *wenyi qingnian* has been well enregistered in the discourse of youth culture with recognizable connotations.

The use of “*wenyi* youth” appeared in subcultural circles in the late 1990s, but it only became a phrase commonly used in China’s popular culture in the late 2000s. In 2009, for example, independent folk singer Shao Yibei released her piece “The Song of Aged Female *Wenyi* Youth” (大龄文艺女青年之歌) online.¹¹ In this work, she shows the difficulty that a female *wenyi* youth faces between her love for *wenyi* activities and the social pressure to marry a socioeconomically dependable male who does not have similar cultural preferences. Due to its simple and teasing lyrics, Shao’s song introduced the term, *wenyi*, to a variety of listeners. Two years later, pop singer Li Yuchun released an album named *Wenyi Youth Who Can Dance* (文艺青年会跳舞), extending the popularity of this word to a much larger public domain. Overseas media also noticed the prevalence of “*wenyi* youth” in Chinese society. In 2012, *The Atlantic* published an article called “China Has Hipsters, Too,” in which the author Monica Tan introduced this “emerging counterculture” and compared it with hipster culture in the context of the United States.¹²

I have outlined the image of *wenyi* youth from several perspectives, but this image, as the connotation of *wenyi* youth as a word, has never been a consistent one in its

¹⁰ A search of “*yaogun*” I did for comparison reveals 54,500 items.

¹¹ http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNzM5NDI3NzY=.html

¹² <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/11/china-has-hipsters-too/264414/>

social circulation over years. Who counts as a real *wenyi* youth is quite a debatable issue for many current participants of independent cultures.¹³ For example, it is also not unusual to see those who started to self-identify as *wenyi* youth a decade or so ago feel uneasy towards the popularization of this term among young people whose embrace of said identity lacks in-depth reflections.¹⁴

In this project, I am less concerned with offering an inclusive definition of *wenyi* youth than investigating the individual mentalities and sociocultural practices of those who are thought to be *wenyi* youth in youth culture discourses. I found Lily Hope Chumley's concept of "aesthetic communication" (Chumley 2011: 8-9) particularly illustrative in the case of *wenyi* youth. In her ethnographic study of contemporary China's visual art industry, she draws on Silverstein's (1997) conceptual differentiation between "language community" and "speech community." Chumley's distinction deals with an "aesthetic community," which is defined by "orientation to norms of communication" such as repertoires and styles, and "practice community," defined by "norms of interaction" including ways of doing things in actual interaction (Chumley 2011: 223-224). Borrowing this framework, it could be argued that *wenyi* youth is more of an aesthetic community than any specific practice community. The defining character of this group is a similar orientation to non-mainstream cultural products and a repertoire of related knowledge. This community is comprised of listeners, audiences, organizers, and

¹³ For example, subgroups hierarchized by competency and productivity exist within China's urban youth cultural practitioners. Gu Duo was the executive editor of *Wenyi Life Weekly*, an institutionalized Internet journal. She showed me how does she define *wenyi youth*, the main body of her readers: "They should know much... they're sort of symbols of intellectuals... they have their own stuff, something they're good at, rather than following current trend or whatever other people like. They have production." Interview with Gu Duo, July 2013.

¹⁴ Informal talk with Yan Jun, Aug 2014.

musicians who share this orientation but participate in independent cultures in different ways.

The construction of *wenyi* youth identity has much to do with different kinds of cultural participation. This identity is primarily actualized, on a fundamental level, through *wenyi* youth's taste for cultural products that differ from those that are popular or "mainstream," a word frequently used by *wenyi* youth. In addition, the formation of this identity often occurs through participatory actions and collective experiences gained through these processes. These events are often thought of as anomalous from the everyday routine of life. They include attending concerts of underground bands or rock music festivals, watching independent films in art movie houses, enjoying dramas played in small theaters, and going to art exhibitions.

On online social networks, "*wenyi* youth" is often defined and talked about in relational ways in which other "types" of youth are crucial references. A viral series of photo collages that was widely reposted on different Chinese websites in 2011 may help to illuminate this point.¹⁵ These collages fictively frame a number of day-to-day activities, each of which is performed in three different styles adopted by "ordinary," *wenyi*, and "2B" (dumb-ass) youth. In these representations by web users, the style of *wenyi* youth is characterized as carefully mannered, sometimes affectedly innovative, and crucially, different from both the normal styles used by "ordinary" youth, and the evidently awkward ones by their "dumb-ass" counterparts. Although the image of *wenyi* youth is often intentionally distorted as comic portrayals, the relationality involved in the discursive construction of *wenyi* youth is noticeable -- *wenyi* style exists in comparisons

¹⁵ Such as this post in Sina Weibo, the predominant microblog service in China: <http://weibo.com/1713926427/xupNwpYuZ>

to other styles. This relationality collaborates with *wenyi* youth's own identification in which staying away from well-established mainstream styles is also a fundamental concern. Oftentimes, their mutual recognition is achieved as much through specific predilection as through rejecting what they think as unimaginative and boring in popular culture. Thus, similar to countercultural musical scene elsewhere (Fonarow 2006; Novak 2013), the construction of *wenyi* identity involves a form of dependency such that it is highly contextualized in association with other cultural patterns.

A *Wenyi* youth often show a sentimental disposition as they interpret what is happening around them. Guo Jia grew up in Beijing, received her B.A. at Beijing University, and is currently pursuing her M.A. in culture studies in Taiwan. She was a figure on campus due to her extensive involvement in *wenyi* activities, such as performing drama, writing for a music magazine, and attending book clubs. To answer my question about the defining characteristics of *wenyi* youth, she commented that they would often “extend their own emotions to the whole world, and account for what they see by projecting their own feelings onto it, rather than understanding it from other perspectives.”¹⁶ An example she then offered says “*wenyi* youth would be melancholic, for example, when they cross paths with an old woman because they were already feeling sentimental even before they meet her.”¹⁷

While this mental awareness is valued as important in both appreciating and creating alternative cultural products, sometimes such sentimentality is made fun of by others who regard it as pretentiously stylish. In the aforementioned case in which *wenyi* youth are compared with other “types” of youth, it is often hard to tell which category,

¹⁶ Interview Guo Jia, July 2013.

¹⁷ Interview Guo Jia, July 2013.

wenyi or “dumb-ass,” would receive more unfriendly laughter. In part because of this subtle stigmatization, in verbal communication, “*wenyi* youth” is often used as a term to refer to others, rather than identifying oneself. For this reason, the discourse of “*wenyi* youth” differs from an instant version of identity politics in which one would openly claim a cultural identity bonds to certain preferences.

3.2 *Between the Intellectual and the Entertaining: Wenyi Youth's Mode of Enjoyment*

Echoing the lyrics of Sex Pistols' frontman, John Lydon, *The Economist* published an article titled, “Anarchy in the PRC: indie music festivals are catching on,” writing:

“(T)he festivals attract the urban *wenyi qingnian* or ‘artistic youth’ (think ironic T-shirts and wrist tattoos) as well as a growing number of *putong qingnian*, the ‘ordinary youth’ who used to stick to crooning syrupy Cantopop in karaoke bars... (But) don’t imagine that tattooed Chinese rockers herald a political revolution... girls and boys just wanna have fun” (May 4th, 2013: 44).

This report nicely documents the popularized enjoyment of music festivals in China, but it is an inaccurate rock-centered reification by characterizing these young participants as “just having fun.” Admittedly, most of them would not seriously engage with the ideological tropes of rebellious rock and roll, but I contend that *wenyi* youth’s participation in music festivals, like their other music related activities, is not merely fun seeking. Many of them have quite specific knowledge of the bands on stage and have individualized expectations of the performance, and their pleasures of participation

greatly consist of the actualization of these expectations. This pleasure, however, does not follow any intellectual integrity. They are more interested in punk as a 1970s' music-style subcultural movement in the U.K. than bringing in the social context of British society in their appreciation. Compared to their schoolmates and parents, they might know much more subcultural "facts," but borrowing Tom Boellstorff's (2003) terms, their (sub)cultural practices are much more like the "dubbing culture" because of their half-understood engagements. Unlike the earlier Chinese underground rock ideology, contemporary independent music greatly de-emphasizes the feature of resistance but inherits the aestheticization of anti-mainstream of its predecessor. Recall that as Jones (1992) shows, the ideology of early Chinese rock heavily centered on resistance-oriented tropes. Although these rebellious ideologies and practices of "angry rock" were formulated based on the early Chinese rock scene in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, they are still influential in today's public discourse in China (de Kloet 2010). However, taking this tradition of rebellion would not make sense to *wenyi* youth if they were to coopt it directly because they do not inhabit the same social conditions as their predecessors did. In post-socialist Chinese youth's engagement with underground music, the greatest change might be that the threshold of participating in musical subcultures and the hardship of maintaining one's alternative status were both significantly lowered. This change leaves little room for the continuity of resistance-hardship discourse.

In a nutshell, it is undeniable that the participation in *wenyi* activities like music festivals generates remarkable pleasures, yet there is also a noticeable amount of intellectual aspects involved in the production of these pleasures. This is the uniqueness of young participants' embrace of independent music, as is *wenyi* youths' embrace of

independent cultures in general. In what follows, I will show that *intellectuality* and *entertainment* are two defining characteristics around which the mode of indie-enjoyment is shaped. I will also explain how they are formed with different technologies of mediation.¹⁸

3.2.1 *Intellectualized Joyfulness*

Unlike the engagement with more accessible forms of popular culture, a sense of intellectuality stands out in independent music fans' cultural participation. I will show in this section that intellectualized listening, driven by mediated visual-textual information, is a distinctive feature of post-socialist Chinese youth's enjoyment of independent music. This feature, which I characterize as intellectualized joyfulness, differs this generation's cultural practices from earlier Chinese rock subcultures on the one hand, and from the way in which their contemporaries enjoy current popular songs on the other. We will see how this mode of enjoyment is cultivated through Chinese rock magazines, a predominant media in the early 2000s, which provided Chinese youth with western subcultural facts and ideologies and helped contextualize these abstract contents into their day-to-day lives.

Listening to music is often an unspeakable auditory experience, but the appreciation of music is a more comprehensive process of aesthetics that requires the mastery of sociocultural backgrounds beyond musicality. Admittedly, underground rock songs and lyrics themselves consist an epistemological source for the knowledge one

¹⁸ Mazzarella defines mediation as "a process by which a given dispensation produces and reproduces itself in and through a particular set of media" (2004: 353). Boyer, in a more comprehensive way, notes that social mediation is "social transaction in its broader sense of the movement of images, discourse, persons and things" (Boyer 2012: 383). Mazzarella's approach to mediation emphasizes its relation to specifically functioning media; Boyer's definition specifies the objects that can be mediated. My use of mediation combines these two definitions by focusing on both the sociocultural translation of rock subculture and the media in which these transactions are conducted.

needs to appreciate them, but for independent music fans in China, the distance between what they listen to and their own cultural background and audio experiences is fairly appreciable, which makes music-external knowledge important in making sense of unfamiliar sounds. Teresa Teng's songs produced in 1970s Taiwan quickly gained huge popularity among Chinese in the early 1980s, but American's psychedelic rock of the same period never achieved such acceptance, even in the 2000s. Songs produced by Chinese rock musicians face the same issue: even if some of these pieces seem to be most "real" and authentic by criticizing social injustices felt by many people, the musical arrangements and lyrics through which these ideas are expressed are still unfamiliar to many domestic audiences. Therefore, it is this audio, social and cultural distance that creates a sense of both unfamiliarity and curiosity.

At the same time, this distance also opens a dynamic space for dealing with these fragmented feelings revolving around *wenyi* youth's enjoyment of independent music. Within such space, multiple forms of text-based media are of particular importance. By providing additional information to the "raw" sounds, magazines, Bulletin Board System (BBS), and other online social networks have helped newcomers to subculture understand and problematize the cultural distance associated with their listening experience. In addition, these media and online communities have promoted the construction of a collective subcultural identity by allowing imagined participation among young fans, especially those who have few chances of joining "real" underground music concerts.

Using rock magazines as an example, I show two primary functions of this media in translating rock from elsewhere to China. This is a process primarily occurred in the mid 2000s, a few years before the emergence of governmental incentive for creative

cultural industry. In this period, the officials still held strong suspicions towards rock subcultures. It was also the time when most my participants were still junior or high school students who contributed most of their time to school life centering on exams.

The first pivotal role played by these magazines is their promotion of the *knowledge* of rock and other non-mainstream music genres. They have consistently introduced the taxonomy of rock music, new releases, and the history of rock in both the western and non-western world, and have visualized the styles of rock for many young Chinese. The CDs sold with rock magazines also have the profound effect of spreading these sounds by making them physically accessible to young people.

Wang Ziheng was born in 1989 and grew up in a suburban district in Tianjin, a northern coastal city with the fourth largest population in China. Wang is now an active improvisational saxophonist and the leader of his experimental band, Ice Seller. As a once ardent CD collector, he started to read rock magazines in high school and was conversant with most of the influential bands in different subdivisions of rock when he was seventeen. However, the tiny music shop near his home, like many similar ones near my interviewees' homes in cities across China, only had a few rock records and could not fulfill his then frenzied purchasing desire formulated through reading music magazines. He even urged his sister to buy records for him from abroad, a costly and roundabout process he quickly stopped.

In Beijing, reading and buying are more closely connected due to the city's famously prosperous cultural market. When Guo Jia recollected how rock magazines cultivated her listening practices ten years ago, she could not hide her pride in this experience:

“I started to buy rock magazines when I was still a middle-school student! Compared to these magazines, the Internet wasn’t an important resource to me... My regular menu included *So Rock!*, *Nomusic*, *Xmusic*. I read them so carefully at that time: sometimes I would read sneakily during the class with my best friend, (we were able to do this) because our seats were on the back of the classroom. We frequently exchanged our magazines and underlined with red ink the contents we thought were important and then we went to music shop to find records mentioned in the magazines.”¹⁹

A second important effect of rock magazines in the process of cultural mediation is the *contextualization* they provide for Chinese rock fans, most of whom are teenagers whose social life is greatly cordoned off by educational institutions. This work is specifically achieved by incorporating the ongoing social events in China with unorthodox interpretations into the magazines. For example, in the mid-2000s, *So Rock!* was the most influential magazine belonging to this category. Apart from regular music content, one-third of this magazine consists of pictures and articles that critically comments and mocks contemporary Chinese society. Common topics include critiquing the state’s totalitarian governance and social injustices and in addition, making fun of the tediousness of mainstream entertainment platforms and the conservative education system. Many letters from readers complain about their school lives, and elder editors respond in the journal, discussing the letters in an amusing style. This mode of interaction, which openly disputes the education ideology prevails nationwide, was extremely rare in the entire post-socialist China’s media.

These magazines were irreplaceable in fostering the mentality of young music fans due to their dramatic transforming force. When aural experience is perceived against

¹⁹ Interview Guo Jia, July 2013.

articulate social backgrounds, songs are transformed from aural arrangements into more productive sources through which teenage listeners are able to connect the social with the musical. Guo Jia started to love punk music at fifteen. In a reflection on her early exposure to punk ideology and its development, she said:

“But that kind of accessing new thoughts was too abstract... I knew some Western subcultural ideologies but they were much too fancy and illusory... I mean, not very down-to-earth. This stuff didn’t come to make sense to me until I read *So Rock!*’s “Pictures Shout”²⁰ and some political articles... then I started to connect those thoughts and music with China’s occurring or occurred history, such as the Cultural Revolution and present situations of rural areas... then I understood what they [Chinese punk bands] were fighting for.”²¹

Guo Jia and Wang Ziheng’s stories reveal that intellectual efforts are key to constructing taste for independent cultures. These unique experiences create an awareness of distinction – a mode of cultural participation distinct from other types of enjoyment that are understood as easier to pursue.

It should be noted, however, that for most fans, although the intellectuality entailed in taste cultivation turns this process to a more sophisticated one, it does not effectively replace the pleasures of music into sincere concerns about society. In other words, the intellectual aspect has more to do with facilitating the appreciation of music than turning these listeners into active participants of other social issues.

²⁰ This regular section presents a couple pages of pictures showing social problems and mocking the hypocrisy of politics, usually in sarcastic and humorous way.

²¹ Interview Guo Jia, July 2013.

To understand this outcome brought to independent music fans, it is useful to draw upon the politics of criticism in post-socialist Chinese media-scapes. Being much the same as how cut rock records (see page 25) were circulated, the presence of *So Rock!* and other publications has been underground,²² but nearly every independent music fan of post-socialist generation is familiar with them. However, as the state's censorship has continued to be intolerant to straightforward criticisms, the style of these magazines and other online media is usually tactful mockery instead of direct censorship. Thus, while a set of anti-mainstream discourses was produced through these media, the circumlocutory strategies employed in the distribution of these discourses greatly reduced the chance of head-on conflicts with the state censorship. This situation corresponds with what Guobin Yang finds in China's online activism. Yang notes that in contrast to pre-internet forms of political resistance in which grand narratives and epic styles of contention were mostly used, contemporary online communities witness the popularization of playful and prosaic patterns (Yang 2009: 86-101). In part because of this negotiated resistance, the effect of these media has more to do with promoting subcultural knowledge and non-mainstream perspectives on social issues than producing diehard protesters.

To summarize, by promoting subcultural knowledge, styles, and ideologies through mass mediated publishing conduits, these music magazines, most of which matured in the early 2000s,²³ became standard choices for post-socialist music fans in their high school and universities, making it possible for young fans to build their own

²² In many cities, one can buy this magazine in regular newsstands that are partly affiliated with China's post-office system. This magazine itself does not have an authorized issuing certificate, so the solution has been to acquire a certificate for its CDs, and to legally sell them with the journal by namely identifying the latter as a "free" gift. In brief, its distribution has taken place in the grey area between state's control and underground publication.

²³ The two most famous journals -- *So Rock!* and *Xmusic* -- were both founded in 1999.

music repertoires and interpretations. In this way, these reading materials successfully produced subcultural agents by connecting local life to the unfamiliar sounds, signs, and thoughts from afar. As a result, these once remote aesthetics and ideologies became intellectually approachable and then were popularized in mediatized ways. However, influenced by the politics of conveying discontent in the Chinese press, although subcultural music is accessible to more young people, the alternative music ideology does not widely produce, in its negotiated mediation, either radical criticisms towards Chinese society, or young subjects with high political awareness beyond music.

3.2.2 Enjoyable Intellectuality

Young cultural actors have not only incorporated certain amounts of intellectual engagement into their entertainment sources, but have, in addition, turned some intellectual pursuits into more entertaining activities.

China has long been a country that highly values education. In Confucian traditions, scholar gentlemen, or well-educated cultural elites, are supposed to excel at Four Arts that include *qin* (music, playing the stringed instruments), *qi* (the game Go), *shu* (calligraphy), and *hua* (painting). In contemporary China, as Kipnis (2007, 2010) and Moskowitz (2013) suggest, these traditional ways of thinking still function in *suzhi* education, which has integrated different capacities of intelligence, art, and athletics together under a broadly defined “education of quality.” In this context, *suzhi* is thus a translatable symbolic currency that umbrellas a variety of competences. Within the specific domain of music, for most post-socialist kids in China, studying music means learning a certain instrument used in western classical music. After one has mastered the

instrument, a more cultured young character is born with an increased amount of *suzhi*.²⁴ For example, a child with a mastery of math is comparable to a child who has mastered a musical instrument at an exceptionally young age. An intellectual sense would be attached to music proficiency by placing it on the same level as math, an essential form of knowledge in primary education.²⁵ In settings like this, the *suzhi* of both children is equal. Therefore, the equivalence of math and music addresses the importance of musical education in contemporary Chinese education system.

For many Chinese teenagers growing up in the 1990s and the 2000s, the verb associated with instruments is generally not “play” (玩). By contrast, music is principally recognized as a tangible achievement or skill one must “learn” (学) through systematic and laddered procedures. In this framework that emphasizes skill manipulation way over feeling-oriented performance, music training is associated closer with technical know-how. An illustrative example is the national certificate test of instruments held on a regular basis. The test-takers, most of whom are teenagers, are required to perform one or several designated pieces in front of several evaluators. Those who pass would be recognized at certain amateur or professional levels by state-affiliated institutions. This qualification system that has dominated music education in China primarily serves children of urban families that can afford this education and can find qualified tutors in their cities. A piano, for example, would have cost close to 10,000 *yuan* in the mid-1990s, equaling the annual income of an average family in the cities. In addition, the cost of a tutor (salaries ranged from 50 to 80 *yuan* per hour) would be regularly paid for by the family. Even if this noble instrument was unaffordable to most parents, it won the favor

²⁴ See more in Hu Leye’s thesis on education and music (Hu 2011: 65).

²⁵ Chinese, math, and English are three major courses in most Chinese elementary schools.

of many well-off middle-class families.²⁶ After having had such a physically and financially prodigious device at home, many parents were even more invested in supervising their children's learning, which put more pressure on these young apprentices. In addition to the piano, other less costly instruments, such as trumpet and violin, were also popular among students' extracurricular education in urban elementary schools.²⁷

What these young students experienced witnesses a process in which post-socialist Chinese youth are caught in the nationwide enthusiasm for the production of "new mode of middle-class" subjects with high cultural capital (Anagnost 2008: 499; 515). Even though this "orthodox" study-test education of western classical music helps produce art stars such as Lang Lang,²⁸ it has some clear disadvantages. A prevalent criticism is that this system has turned art to homework, so it suppresses children's passion of music and lowers their sensitivity to the beauty of art. For many children, the achievement gained from practicing music has more to do with the transformed *suzhi*, evinced through certificates and other honors, than with the enjoyment of what they play. Music is often used to obtain non-musical goals. As Anagnost points out correctly, one

²⁶ As Kraus notes in his book on piano's localization in China in the course of the 20th century, although the political meaning attached to piano changed overtime, it was recognized as an instrument for high art consistently among intellectuals, political elites, and pre-PRC capitalists, a status group he defines as "middle class" by taking Weberian conceptualization.

²⁷ Two factors other than maturing economic conditions also contributed to this trend. First, as Zhang Li points out in her ethnography of China's metropolitan middle class, these newly rich parents are anxious in their own lack of cultural capital, and so they try to alleviate this anxiety by enthusiastically investing in the education of their children (Zhang, 2010: 9). During the childhood of these parents who were born in the 1950s and the 1960s, the influence of their generally low-income levels and the Cultural Revolution had deprived them of their chances for art training. It is quite understandable then, why they now have such an aspiration of cultivating their children. Second, receiving official recognition of one's musical expertise, whether it is an authorized certificate or formal prize, has practical benefits on different levels of entrance exams from middle school to college. For example, extra points are offered to those outstanding masters of instruments, as are for a number of extracurricular activities.

²⁸ A pianist well known to Chinese populace due to his recognition gained in international piano contests and performances market and his frequent appearance in classical music performance broadcasted to nationwide audience.

result of *suzhi* discourse is that “life itself becomes calculable as human capital” (2004: 203) in China’s current neoliberal economy.

In short, music has been recognized, often excessively, as a high-end art whose expertise requires sustained professional cultivation. In addition, music, under the influence of *suzhi* education, is understood more as a skill that has practical functions than a way to express one’s own feelings. In short, the official music education in contemporary China has largely shaped post-socialist generation’s understanding of the legitimate ways in which music, as a remote art, is learned, performed, and linked with issues beyond music.

Wenyi youth’s amateur attempts in cultural and art activities rework the logic of practicing music. Independent musicians’ self-taught competence, for example, exemplifies such an alternative to the hegemonic way of learning music. Among my fifteen interviewees who primarily identify as musicians, most did not receive any formal training in classical music during their childhoods. Even those “trained” musicians are not necessarily influenced by their early experience of such education. Yan Yulong is a violin soloist and the guitar player of Chui Wan, a Beijing-based psychedelic rock band. He told me that his formally learned violin skill has little influence, in terms of musical ideology and ideas of composition, in his current choice of psychedelic rock and violin improvisation. Similar to Yan, most of the regular experimental musicians of Zoomin Night and other independent bands started their music career as amateurs. Many of them, especially males, began by learning guitar unprofessionally after being immersed in guitar-based rock music.²⁹ From listening to music to producing their own tracks, experimental musicians and other underground bands have avoided the highbrow

²⁹ This corroborates Hu’s findings in Shanghai’s independent music circle (Hu 2011).

approach to music by making it pleasurable based on their specific, individual interests. Being sufficiently de-institutionalized, they also need to train themselves in multiple ways, but this process is remarkably different from the primary source favored by both the state and the market for music education. By doing so, they have transformed the heavyweight intellectuality to a different kind that is enjoyable, self-sufficient, and no longer needs to be judged according to arbitrary hierarchies.

3.3 Living a Different Life: The Core Rationale of Wenyi Youth

Cultural taste for independence does not exist by itself as merely a system for articulating personal aesthetics. It intervenes with the life of individuals whose perception of day-to-day encounters is subtly influenced by cultural and ideological imaginations stimulated by such taste. It mobilizes what its advocates appreciate in cultural products into their practical projects of life-making. Cultural taste is also a mediator of social life in which one's status is channeled, in particular contexts and with the participation of others, from a subject in pure relation to artistic-cultural objects to a social agent whose ideas and acts avail greater sociality.

To independent music fans in urban China, actual participation in relevant activities constitutes a significant basis for mutual recognition. This is because these interpersonal practices cultivate a form of collectivity based upon memories shared by a specific group of people. Although the original happenings are temporally and spatially fixed, they join the subsequent production of discourse and social interaction as citable realities. At the same time, these participatory engagements provide an effective testing ground in which young subjects can articulate the relation between culturally distant music and the more situated everyday specificities. In the context of independent music

fans, it is notable that some of their practices involve certain inconsistencies with the norms they are required to maintain in other tracks of life. This tension between the normal and the unconventional makes it a productive entry for examining these young people's mentality in their participation.

Going to rock music concerts is a revealing case that brings together these issues. As a concrete way of enjoyment, it is experienced by the majority of independent music fans, most of whom simultaneously maintain a university student status. Compared to the different kinds of spectatorship and the musicality fans experience in live performances, the efforts put forth by them to reach the venues are similar across musical genres within independent music scenes. In particular, the normality of campus life is an important context within which this experience is framed. In my early interviews, for example, while I was primarily interested in exploring some of the core attributes valued by indie fans in their self and mutual identification, the semi-structured conversations were often led by my interviewees to the discussion of their everyday lives on campus. This conversation-internal pattern also suggests the relational nature of independent mentality –it evolves from a dualistic web woven by on-campus routines and off-campus joys.

In the following section, I start with two stories about going to rock concerts and then draw upon more interlocutors' accounts for university life in Beijing. By doing so, I will examine what kinds of pleasures and obstacles are involved in their actual practices of the appreciation of music? Additionally, I posit what the valued mentality is that greatly motivates these practices?

In the aftermath of a typical rock concert that ends at midnight, a bunch of sweaty young people come out of a box-like two-floor building, stand or sit along the pedestrian

walkway close to the front side of the venue, and regain their hearing that has temporarily been harmed. These ebullient figures are recovering from and recollecting the passionate moshing that finished ten minutes ago. They now face the difficulty of going back to the residence hall on campus, since returning so late conflicts with the regulations of many universities.

In China, most college and graduate students live in on-campus dormitories provided by their schools, and nearly every university has a policy about students who return late, which is regulated when the manager of each building records those offenses.³⁰ Students are supposed to be penalized after being late a certain number of times. Even if such a rule is not enforced in many schools, few students would actually be punished just for returning too late; however, the policy still creates a psychological barrier around violating it. Besides, a common undergraduate dorm in Beijing's universities has one room and is occupied by four to six students. With everyone living in the same room (three to four square meters per person), the personal space is rather small. Thus, for those who go to indie music concerts, disturbing other roommates late at night when they return to their dorms is another troublesome effect of breaking norms.

In Gu Duo's freshman year in 2010, when she moved to Beijing from Xiamen, a coastal city that is in the economic uppermost in Fujian Province, she was quickly fascinated by the ceaseless rock gigs in her new, huge city. As an un-calloused young woman, Gu Duo did not want to face her building manager every time she went to late-

³⁰ In a male student residence hall at Beijing Normal University, for example, if a student returns late, the manager would wake up, look out to see who was there, then he would walk out of his room, and open the door for him. In exchange, the student would need to write down his name, room number, department, and student ID on the manager's notebook. Waking someone up late at night is an embarrassing and unpleasant choice for many independent music fans, especially when they have to do this frequently. In addition, this documented evidence is slight but still an unhappy burden to many college students in China.

night concerts. Instead, she chose to remain out all night, most of the time alone. Sometimes she sat in the 24-hour McDonald's for the entire night; on other occasions, when she was too tired, she would find a cheap hostel and sleep there. Even though she often felt unfamiliar with the place where she woke up, Gu Duo's tone is far from painful when recalling this period. It seems that although such choices were to some extent unwilling solutions to their schools' regulation, the unforgettable joy of participating in live music makes the choices worthwhile for *wenyi* youth like Gu Duo.

Xiao Hu, a junior at Beijing Normal University, went even further than Gu Duo by renting a small room with a bunk bed in a six-floor building in the Drum Tower area, where most alternative music venues are located. Two concerns were crucial to her moving off campus. Firstly, having worked part-time for almost two years at Maybe Mars, an eminent indie music company located in Drum Tower, Xiao Hu became increasingly habituated to the everyday life in this area, and so she decided to live closer to Drum Tower's musical community. Another reason for Xiao Hu's move was her aspiration to have more personal space, which was impossible in her on-campus dormitory. During my fieldwork, I rented this six square-meter tiny room from Xiao Hu and lived there for about two months while she left Beijing for summer break. As a former undergraduate student at Xiao Hu's university, I had spent over three years, from 2008 to 2011, living in an on-campus residence building. On the day I moved into her current off-campus apartment, I was immediately able to empathize, with my still fresh undergraduate memory, how Xiao Hu felt when she became the master of her own room by moving off campus. The one-meter wide bunk bed looked exactly the same as the university's standard installation, yet the fact that she no longer had to share it with

someone who goes to bed four hours earlier than her was cheerful. A sense of being independent, as I realized then, has much to do with the solid ownership of such a small space and the freedom of making use of it.

Xiao Hu and other *wenyi* youth are often seen as deviants because of their unwillingness to conform the norms held many Chinese university students. In China's universities, diligence is often highly valued and many students work to achieve various goals framed by their schools. The expansion of higher education in China has produced more seats in colleges, but getting into a good school is still a highly competitive process. Before they enter universities, most Chinese students have lived focused lives for over ten years in which studying and taking exams were their major concerns. Achieving predictable and rather uniform goals by competing in different examination systems has thus deeply rooted in the minds contemporary Chinese youth. Once they adjust to college lives, this competitive mentality persists. They quickly find many new college tropes to compete for, such as maintaining a high GPA, qualifying to attend graduate school without exams, earning the chance to study abroad, taking the GRE and other English tests, having good internships, and accumulating experience in student organizations. Those who do well in achieving these measurable goals often become model students in universities, especially in top-ranked ones.

Many other students, however, go in the opposite direction. In part because direct supervision from both parents and pedagogic institutions disappears as soon as college starts, they start to live a unprecedented entertainment-focused life in which they spend quite a lot of time playing computer games, watching TV series, and studying only before end-of-term exams for a couple of days. Generally speaking, the *wenyi* youth's self-

identification is based on a strategy that distances them from these two student categories, the norm-holding academic and the less-motivated.

Among *wenyi* youth, the earnest ones do not care to spend their valuable college years in either of these two opposing ways. Rather, they prefer to be critical thinkers with more independent ideas. Even if they take schoolwork seriously and maintain a good academic status, they usually do not internalize these evaluative standards with sincere enthusiasm. A common argument shared by the most contemplative *wenyi* youths notes that their “model” colleagues reflect too little on the progression of achievements that they eagerly pursue. Such a critique is often presented in a disdainful way, but this superior attitude of *wenyi* youth is often found in conjunction with the loneliness of living in colleges.

Poiuny³¹ comes from Hefei, the capital city of Anhui Province, and grew up in an upper middle class family. She was a junior majoring in human resources at Renmin University, a renowned comprehensive university in Beijing that has distinguished undergraduate programs in management and finance. When I asked about her experience as a music fan during her freshman year, her first response was not about music, but her dislike for her school. I followed up on this topic:

Huang: You didn't like your school...? Why?

Poiuny: Once I got enrolled in my school, I found that I didn't fit in well – people around me were just uninteresting.

Huang: How so? Can you further describe “uninteresting”?

Poiuny: It's like... they are college students now, but their mental states are still at the level of elementary school. What is important to them are

³¹ The nickname preferred by the interviewee.

just earning a couple of credits, thinking of the guaranteed qualification of access to graduate school (by maintaining good academic records)... things like that.

Huang: So, does it mean that people around you were much too homogenous and had lost their sense of curiosity too early?

Poiuny: Yes, it's pretty much not fun. Plus, people in this school are flooded with a weird sense of superiority. They often think of how super nice this school is, and with its precious brand embodied, one would have a brilliant future or whatever... which is popular in my peers. I think it's idiotic, as they have never ruminated (on this viewpoint), instead they just follow what other people tell them. They don't have their *own* judgment, what they do is not based on their *own* thoughts.³²

Unlike her peers, Poiuny was far from having a clear plan as a freshman. During the interview, she was still a little uncertain of the next step of her career, but she emphasized that her indecisiveness was a result of having multiple choices and knowing the advantages and drawbacks of each, rather than unreflective desiring for different goals.

At the same time, many *wenyi* youth have a similar critique toward their college classmates who spend too much time on inactive entertainments. They think, for example, that those who lock themselves in the dormitory every day playing games, watching popular videos, and casually chatting online are surrendering through passive enjoyment to these less valuable amusements. Twenty-three year-old He Fan has a

³² Interview Poiuny, June 2013.

critical mentality towards this way of life. Having grown up in Beijing and received his B.A. from China Agricultural University in Beijing, He Fan is now participating in several music groups that are well known to independent music fans. He is the vocalist and guitarist of Birdstriking, the bassist of Carsick Cars, the MC and synthesizer player of experimental hip-hop group Deadly Cradle Death, and has solo experimental music side projects. I asked about his opinion on the relation between rock and resistance when he was a college student. He noted that:

“To me, resistance was being different from many university students. They were sort of well-behaved and docile... and after class they would just go back to their beds, playing games... you know, those kinds of things a university student would like to do... So I decided to live off-campus with my friends and to spend more time on rock music, which is really happy, and at that time, I thought living like this was resistance.”³³

In explaining the motivation behind his practice, He Fan draws on a dichotomy similar to Poiuný's. Whether or not playing computer games is interesting, it belongs to a category of entertainment in a greater and homogenous university popular culture. To him, the individuality in this popular culture is such a passive one that the sheer act of rejecting it, such as he did, shows a certain degree of resistance. Doing rock and roll in this context serves as an alternative that holds off the expectations for young subjects structured and/or imposed by the educational institutions.

Among independent music fans whose musical tastes are cultivated by listening, few end up being musicians. For most people, their encounters with alternative music do

³³ Interview He Fan, July 2013.

not directly affect their lives by switching them from ordinary participants in the aesthetic community to productive figures in the practice community. However, as I have shown, in these proactive young figures' pursuits for musical culture, their experiences and reflections show great similarities regardless of what kinds of roles they take in the music world. In both Xiao Hu and Gu Duo's accounts, we see how institutional obstacles are incorporated into the narratives of the actions they took to become closer participants. On the other hand, when Poiuny and He Fan talk about alternative cultural practices, they both emphasize the uninteresting regularities in school life.

In everyday communication, *wenyi* youth often used as a language to identify people, especially in labeling others. It is as much a discourse by which *wenyi* subjects are produced as a term referring to a collection of people existing in prior to this discourse. To understand the productive aspect of the discourse of *wenyi* youth, it is useful to employ Foucault's notion that discourse is a dispersion of "statements" textually or verbally circulated across time and space (1972: 25-27). The ways in which these statements or utterances unfold could change from case to case, but the statements keep rather stable on their own. In the context of independent music and *wenyi* youth, individual experiences may vary from one subject to the other, but there is a relatively steady way of talking about these experience that makes these variations compatible to each other. Therefore, what is noteworthy in the ethnographic vignettes is not any generalizable "real" changes brought to these youths, but a consistent discursive structure they use to articulate their day-to-day experience. Specifically, there are several noticeable statements in this framework, some of which have been hinted above: 1. A judgment of the everyday – the expectable regularity in daily routine is uninteresting and

problematic; 2. A personal morality of independence – one cannot just passively accept the visible arrangement of life without independent thinking; 3. A vision of the ideal – alternative life-styles organized around music (or other artistic forms) and ideologies of independent cultures are better ways of living.

In my view, this framework of thinking is of prominent social significance for two reasons. First, this framework is broadly situated in its participants' problematization of their ongoing lives. Specifically, it produces a double process with regard to sociality, one is about the in-group identification and the other about the distinction between social groups. While the embrace of independent music tells a process of social integration based on shared participatory experiences and musico-ideological concerns, it also indicates a process in which these tastes, concerns, and the desire for engaging help create a symbolic chasm between *wenyi* youth and other "ordinary" college students. This symbolic chasm corroborates the relational nature of *wenyi* identity in popular discourse. Second, as a powerful intellectual apparatus, this framework of perception involves a strategy of willful detachment, which can greatly mobilize the distinction in the domain of individual aesthetics, projecting them into the distinctions one needs to make in his/her social life. This strategy is a different one from Bourdieu's thesis on social distinction because it works through an intellectual intentionality in interpreting cultural preferences. In contemporary China, this way of boundary making also sharply differs from the politics of recognition applied by wealthy people, who often blatantly show off their belongings that people in different social strata could recognize effortless (Osburg 2013: 118).

3.4 The Socioeconomics of Being Independent

So far I have examined *wenyi* youth by describing what *wenyi* is, who are participants, how they enjoy, and the ways of thinking that emerge simultaneously with the rise of these young urban citizens. In what follows, I will revisit two cases – buying records and going to concerts – to show how socioeconomic factors collaboratively cultivate independent music culture in post-socialist China.

Compared to the impact of formal music education, popular music and western rock have had much stronger effects on my participants' musical taste. The first setting I choose is urban record shops. Nearly every independent music fan and practitioner I interviewed notes that buying records at these shops was the very first step of their musical journeys. A large portion of them share a similar narrative about the path of developing their musical tastes: they first bought pop music records of Hong Kong and Taiwan singers, then they found —often coincidentally— casually-classified rock records in music shops that mainly sell popular pieces. They encountered these records consistently when they were junior or high school students. Further division of music preference occurred usually in college: some of them later turned to be more experimental music focused, some playing rock-based indie music, others maintaining non-practitioner's roles.

Between the late 1990s and the mid-2000s, the compact disc (CD) was perhaps the most popular material medium for published music circulating in China. Before these years, cassette tapes had dominated for more than a decade; in the aftermath, online media became the number one choice for most people. It was exactly in these five to ten years that the CD experienced its boom in popularity. It is also in this time period that

post-socialist generation underwent their adolescence during which they were first exposed to popular music.

In the early 2000s, a typical record shop in urban areas often had a highly mixed and often unstructured repository of music, movies, and mediatized performance arts. In terms of taxonomy, the most popular classification system of music was not based on music genres, but on the loosely defined geography and ethnicity that is relevant to where and by whom the music was produced. *Gangtai* (Hong Kong and Taiwan), *Oumei* (European and American), *Dalu* (Mandarin), and *Rihan* (Japanese and Korean), were four major categories. Gender was also considered as an important standard for subcategories within these bigger four. Under these circumstances, western rock bands or singers that occasionally entered into the circulation were often put into in the shelves of *Oumei* popular music. These music shops were important conduits through which big record companies marketed their popular music records. However, licensed products often gave way their sales to much cheaper illegal copies sold in the same store.³⁴ Due to the state censorship and the rather small market, most of the rock genres and other unpopular pieces did not appear in the legal CD copies at all. Moreover, given the lack of introduction to rock music in the mass media, it was difficult for Chinese youth to locate these unfamiliar sounds as certain genres in western music taxonomy. Thus, before they found rock magazines through fairly invisible conduits, this chaotically arranged directory of records itself was the main source for constructing the young Chinese listeners' own understanding of music.

³⁴ Most of my interviewees remember that a legal copy was priced at around US\$3-4 (25 to 30 *yuan*), while their pirated counterpart at US\$1-2 (5-10 *yuan* per disc).

Since tracking down an album is such a randomly achieved process that requires a great amount of luck, economic investment became crucial in fostering one's love for music because such an investment allows for more attempts. Twenty-four year-old improvisational saxophonist Wang Ziheng still prefers buying CDs today, and he attributes his uncommon inclination for this "outdated" medium to his early experience as a teenage customer. Like many of my interviewees, Tianjin-based Wang Ziheng began his musical journey at the record store near his home. As a middle-schooler, fourteen year-old Wang Ziheng made his decision on buying particular CDs "if they looked great," but whether it was really great or not "can only be testified after [he] bought it." In recalling his craze of buying CDs, Wang noted "it was both happy and painful; (because) [he] often found fabulous stuff but also spent too much money on pieces that made [his] investment not worthwhile." However, this wrong investment was quite affordable as he explained later: "I was fairly lucky to grow up in a middle-class family so my pocket money was enough for me to buy discs." Wang Ziheng's reflection on his family's background as "middle-class," but given the amount of discs he purchased when he was still a high-school student, it was quite apparent that he grew up in a well-off family.

In the cultivation of teenagers' habit of listening to music, the CD Walkman is an expensive yet pivotal device. An average CD Walkman would cost 700-800 *yuan* (about US \$100 at that time) in the early 2000s, which was a considerable investment. For example, the average monthly disposable income of a core family in Beijing was 2,314 *yuan* (US \$282) in 2003, so a CD Walkman costs approximately one-thirds of it.³⁵ This

³⁵ Beijing's income level was higher than most of other cities while the device's price did not show such a variation.

device is pivotal because it offers its owners greater autonomy to make use of their time. For most teenagers who grew up in post-socialist China, the time they can freely use for their own purpose is often limited – most schools are attentive to the management of students' daily schedules and consequently, little free time is left for them (see more in Fong 2006; Kipnis 2010). Living with such a highly structured sense of time, the few hours one spends on the way between school and home and the breaks between classes consist of the most flexible blocks of time during a school day. Compared to their inadequately equipped classmates, Walkman owners are mobile listeners who if they had two to three extra hours, could use to listen to music. It is through this accumulation of aural experience day by day that the curiosity in music was finally integrated as a pleasurable part of their lives.

Twenty-four year-old Zhou Ruichao's story well illustrates this point. Having grown up in Beijing's Wudaokou area, the geographical center of many universities in Haidian District, Zhou established his interest in popular music at a very young age and later developed it into more specified preference for heavy metal. His experience of listening to music was largely influenced by the prosperity of youth culture in his neighborhood, but more importantly, as he stressed in the interview, this prosperity would not have had a direct influence on him if he did not get a Panasonic CD Walkman when he was twelve. After he possessed a Walkman and became a mobile listener, he started investing more of his pocket money into buying CDs. Thanks to Wudaokou's thriving entertainment market for popular culture, Zhou was able to procure discs from more than five record shops on his favorite street, just five-minute walking distance from this home. A similar narrative was given by Guo Jia, whose early ownership of a CD

Walkman and MD player greatly mobilized her manipulation of music products in Xidan, another renowned shopping destination for Beijingers. A more fervent listener, Wang Ziheng, who had broken four Walkmen in high school, depicted his image at that time like this: “I often walked with my Walkman at hands and a dozen of CDs in my backpack, switching to one another regularly... it was a kind of feeling that I just couldn’t go without them.”³⁶

Another point of interest is attending underground music concerts. In the 2010s, this action reveals the importance of economic competence in post-socialist Chinese youth’s practice of “independence.” The expansion of higher education and the location of universities, generally found in big cities, have produced the demographic and socio-geographical basis for alternative music scenes and other forms youth culture. Within a variety of popular forms of entertainment in urban universities, participating in independent music performances requires a higher cost of time and money than its counterpart pastimes. In Beijing, for example, the average distance between the college-concentrated area in Haidian District and the central part of the Drum Tower area, where most independent music venues are located, is more than 10 kilometers. Therefore, one usually needs about an hour and a half for this round-trip. While Beijing’s public transportation has a reputation for its low price, there is no cheap bus at midnight after most concerts, so audiences have to take taxis that costs about 40 *yuan* (US \$7) per vehicle. The price of a ticket for a well known domestic band’s show ranges from 50 to 100 *yuan* (US \$8-15), while some foreign bands touring to Beijing ask for a higher entrance fee usually starting from 150 *yuan* (US \$25) or more. Considering the extra costs, such as drinks and band products sold in the venue, the total expense of going to a

³⁶ Interview Wang Ziheng, July 2013.

gig can vary from 100 to 200 *yuan* (US \$15-30). This amounts to 10 to 20 percent of average monthly expense for a Beijing university student.³⁷ To give a clearer reference, with this amount of money, one can buy 10 to 15 meals in a local college canteen.

In short, establishing musical preference through sustaining explorative purchase is a memory shared by many urban independent music fans. From the early formation of the preference for rock music to the maintenance of this taste and carrying out other forms of independent cultural practices, it requires a rather expensive investment. This process is greatly conditioned, as several cases above demonstrate, by a relatively high financial status. It is not surprising then, that the children of China's emerging middle-class urban families have become the majority of the participants in this thriving field.

3.5 “Not Fitting In:” Articulating Discontent in Cultural Mediation

“How many rich kids are involved in rock” and “how many rockers are rich” are two questions whose answers signify very different social meanings. Much attention has been paid to the latter, forming a simplified understanding of Chinese rock as elite-based subculture. While such an account captures the characteristics of early Chinese rock subculture well and correctly offers a wide view of independent music's status within contemporary China, it overlooks that *in cities*, the obstacle to engaging with independent music is no longer a socioeconomic one. The fact that the majority of middle-class youth have not become participants of independent cultures shows that the social formation of *wenyi* youth is not a *direct* result of external economic condition.

I argue that in addition to the well-structured socioeconomic factors specific to post-socialist generation, the growth of *wenyi* youth is also rooted in the unstructured and

³⁷ Estimation is based on “A Survey on Current Consumption Situation of the College Students in Beijing” (Zhang, Pei, etc. 2013).

incongruous aspects in China's social transformation. The *wenyi* youth's advocacy of independence is an attempt to articulate the inconsistent paces of changes that occur in different realms of a certain individual's social life. Specifically, it is the unsorted mediation of various cultural products that have been paramount in establishing a sociocultural sense of not fitting in among *wenyi* youth. In analyzing the huge impact of cultural products on China's post-socialist generation, "speed" is a keyword that first needs to be examined. In the circulation of audio products, for example, the speed with which different sounds enter into independent music fans' repositories and transform their listening experience is much faster than changes of everyday life in their families, schools, and society in a broader sense.

A compilation of narratives based on several interlocutors' experience goes like this: last week you were listening to Jay Chou³⁸ on your way home on a bus and mimicking his Mandarin rap, while this afternoon when you tried to purchase Jay's new album you were visually attracted by the heart grenade in the front of Green Day's *American Idiot*, which was casually put on shelf next to Jay's new release by a member of a music shop's staff who can't tell the difference. You bought them together for twenty *yuan* (US\$ 2.5), a typical amount of money you would spend every weekend for one or two illegally copied CDs. Next week you learn about something called "punk" from the introduction sheet in the CD set and search its history in the Internet. Summer break comes. You listened to a bunch of CDs of old-school punk and are excited about these rebellious sounds from the 1970s. The Ramones become your favorite during the two-month holiday, and you can't wait to introduce them to your best friend in order to rescue him from the awkward pop stars you enjoyed together last semester. Now you know post-

³⁸ One of the most popular singers in Chinese popular music.

punk and are crazy about Ian Curtis's neurotic vocals. A few months later you begin to lay aside those classic punk CDs and think that No Wave is the best one and Lydia Lunch has the most beautiful voice. By two days before next summer break, you have come to know someone from an online music forum, saying you can go see him with your flash drive and he will let you copy his 30 gigabytes of experimental music.

During this year, what you have listened to has wandered within the past half century of music. However, your school life has not changed considerably. Your Chinese teacher still explains the article that has been in the textbook for over fifty years to your classmates, admitting there are multiple ways of understanding a certain "image" but still persuades you to draw on the "most correct" answer in the coming exam. On the same day, an older college friend of yours spends a whole night reading a history of 1960's American folk music revival published in *So Rock! Magazine*. But the following morning, he or she has to take the final exam in "Principles of Marxist Philosophy," which is worth three credits and is a compulsory course at every university. Even if one or two nights' studying the learning guide would ensure a temporarily perfect manipulation of these principles, you have no way to just ignore it and the other required courses in the "Ideological and Political Theory Courses."³⁹ You are disappointed by the lack of flexibility in your Chinese exam, as your friend is frustrated by cramming those principles.

In brief, in the confrontation with exciting and inexhaustible sounds, the uneventful everyday life of school is often downplayed. The circulation of cultural products is accelerated in comparison to ordinary life, so that there is a considerable contrast between the sounds, texts, imageries, and ethos involved in subcultural

³⁹ A series of compulsory courses required by the China's Ministry of Education, including 13-18 credits.

particulars and the generally slower social transitions in post-socialist China. Thus, the differing feelings one experiences in the switch between fanciful cultural products and rather stable social conditions is key to the formation of a mindset of not fitting in.

Conclusions

Drawing upon ethnographic research conducted with independent music participants, this chapter offers an analytic description of *wenyi* youth (either as real subjects or a popular discourse) and their cultural practices. *Wenyi* youth refers to a collection of young people whose social connection is based on shared cultural taste and aesthetic experiences, which primarily include the appreciation of non-mainstream artistic-cultural products and embodied participation. Unlike interpretations that attempt to answer whether their participation is a form of resistance or not, my approach focuses on the mode of participation in their practices. I characterize their enjoyment of independent music as including both intellectualized joyfulness and enjoyable intellectuality. Specifically, I discuss how my interviewees participate in live performances, a key practice in independent music scene that demonstrates their negotiation between personal pleasures and worries of breaking institutional rules. I also review the ways in which they talk about their experience and highlight a framework of perception consisting of a set of dichotomies by which they articulate the tension between their individuality and everyday life around. I further argue that the cultural politics employed by *wenyi* youth is a relational one based on the distinction of tastes. The legitimacy of these tastes is importantly defined by the act of willful detachment from their disinterests.

I review the social conditions of post-socialist China that are critical to the production of *wenyi* youth and their cultural practices. These conditions include state policies – economy, population, and education – and the development of media and the technologies of mediation. While these specificities can be structured into a framework that sets the regularities for all Chinese urban youth who have grown up in the 1990s and 2000s, I show that it is not this process of universal structuring, but the incongruities situated in this process, that give birth to *wenyi* youth as a subgroup within post-socialist youth. What becomes noticeable here is not only how *wenyi* youth’s cultural practices are conditioned by social realities, but also how they make sense of the incongruities in these realities. Cultural practice, in this way, is a means for articulating social life.

This chapter showcases the importance of embodied practices in the production of *wenyi* youth and independent culture. In the next chapter, I will discuss how the independent music is reproduced as a genre through the workings of language. We will see how the language about music is crucial for framing the mode of participation and producing the popularity of rock-based independent music.



Figure 3.1 In the break of Duck Fight Goose's concert held at XP (2013.6.23 Photo by author)

CHAPTER 4

PRODUCING GENRES THROUGH LANGUAGE: TEXTUAL MEDIATION OF MUSIC IDEOLOGIES IN CHINA'S ALTERNATIVE MUSIC SCENES

Introduction

Over the past decade, the opportunities for participating in the once marginalized rock subculture have significantly increased in contemporary China. Rock music has transitioned from a rigidly perceived underground subculture to a series of dispensations that openly intervene in public culture in many ways. At the same time, a group of musicians and organizers have also carved out a smaller social field that contains more experimental and improvisational forms of sound production. Embedded in these various musical practices is an accompanying “music ideology,” which I define as a set of beliefs, feelings, and reflexive understandings of music that guide related cultural practices and produce new practitioners. Taking an analytical perspective toward “language about music” (Feld and Fox 1994; Feld et al. 2004) this chapter primarily examines the language used in promoting music events. Music event promotion/advertising/marketing, a text-mediated process that precedes actual musical performances, is vital for investigating the ways in which music ideologies are both displayed in and produced by textual information that shape the sounds, affects, performances, and modes of participation. Specifically, this chapter analyzes online posts that announce music events held at XP and the School Bar, two venues in Beijing whose marked musical orientations are experimental and rock and roll, respectively. A detailed

comparison between the online posts for these two venues is provided to show how experimental-based musicians differentiate their music from rock through the process of textual mediation that preliminarily frames musical realities. Additionally, by examining two posts for Zoomin' Night, the experimental performances regularly held at XP, I further demonstrate that the consistent way of self-positioning in public space through the workings of language is vital to constructing the distinct genre of promotions. Ethnographic accounts of Zoomin' Night's live performances are also used to contextualize the reading of these texts.

My analysis leads to two primary themes. First, it brings up the issue of the articulation of musical genres. I argue that this process of boundary making is a highly interactive one that is mediated by music ideologies manifested in varying modes of participation. Different from previous scholarship that focuses on products (songs, lyrics, albums, etc.), production (institutionalized or non-institutionalized composition, live performance), and circulation (market, sales, acceptance), my approach broadens our current understanding of China's alternative music scenes by looking at how genres are made distinct in both virtual and face-to-face communication. In terms of methodology, this approach makes use of text not only as demonstrative ("what text reflects"), but also as productive ("what text does").

Second, this chapter touches on the issue of how music is socially (re)produced. I argue that in the process of the social (re)production of music, what is crucial is not only the musical features, the ways of making music, or the political economic factors, but also the forms of sociality encouraged by and embedded in different music ideologies. In previous discussions on Chinese rock, authenticity and resistance are often noted as two

features used by Chinese rock musicians and fans in defining the genre of rock. Authenticity refers to the idea that rock music should truthfully reflect performers' inner feelings and thoughts. Resistance, on the other hand, is the belief that real rock music should maintain rebellious attitudes to accepted social phenomena or common sense. This analysis shows that in addition to these two well-registered tropes, expectation and expansion are two under-discussed elements in Chinese rock music ideology that frame the preferred mode of social interaction in important ways. By "expectation," I mean the specific logic of pleasure held by rock participants and organizers: audiences are satisfied by live concerts once what they expect prior to performances is actualized. By "expansion," I am referring to the agenda often shared by many kinds of promoters of rock music, who are eager to expand the reach of the rock scene and spread this music to the broader population. While authenticity and resistance help maintain the underground status of rock music, expectation and expansion make it less immune to mainstream culture's sociocultural integration. It is the tension between these two groups of core values that cause dilemmas for the production of rock-based independent music. As for experimental music, what is valued by practitioners centers on the unpredictability and small-scaled intimacy of live performances. This ethnographic study reveals that, in contrast to the seemingly alienated feeling indexed by the notion of experimental music, practices organized and mediated by experimental music ideology can foster remarkable interpersonal closeness through various forms of participation, fostering a valuable sociality among musicians. Because the spectatorship and the sociality actualized through these musico-ideological concerns are usually unable to be reproduced satisfactorily, experimental music is less likely to be incorporated when it confronts mainstream

popular culture. This point regarding the sociality of music makes it problematic that experimental music culture is viewed as difficult to expand based purely on its internal musical attributes, as is often taken for granted in common perceptions.

4.1 Exploring Possibilities: Experimental Music in China

As an emerging field of cultural production, China's experimental music scene has received scant discussion in academic writings on the Chinese alternative music-scene with the exception of the work of Wang (2012) and de Seta (2011). As Wang Jing (2012) correctly notes, the experimental production of music has its pivotal origin in underground rock. While de Kloet (2010) highlights a firm "rock mythology" in the ramifications of rock-based genres, Wang shows that the central concern of experimental musicians is a constant exploration of possible ways of performing inspired by highly flexible and reflexive understandings of music. Specifically, the process of making and performing experimental music allows musicians to try numerous ways of listening and expressing, articulate everyday philosophical issues, and organize a utopian mode of communal living (Wang 2012). Gabriele de Seta's thesis (2011) on Shanghai's experimental music scene focuses on the concept of "mediation," showing the ways in which experimental music defies established forms of mediation dominated by the state, mass media, and institutions (de Seta 2011: 3-5). By describing the details of experimental performances in Shanghai, he also notes that these live performances "liberate suppressed or unwelcome cultural forms" (de Seta 2011: 37) and actualize "critical aesthetics" (de Seta 2011: 40) that are scarcely seen in other places, including rebellious rock subculture. To continue this investigation into China's experimental music scene, this chapter aims to examine the semiotic and interactive processes through

which the distinction between rock and experimental music is constructed. Further, by drawing upon ethnographic details about the boundary making of these two genres, this chapter probes into the ways in which musical genres are produced in a broader cultural milieu through actual pieces of communications between real participants.

4.2 Problematics and Analytical Framework

The studies of China's alternative music-scape mentioned in Chapter 2 have a well-shared focus on the internal features, or how people characterize the “essential nature,” of rock music. These analyses observe that in China's rock discourse, the attributes of rock music are usually framed as something intrinsic to such music and circulate unvaryingly. What remains unexamined, however, are the ways in which these attributes are made possible and reproduced in interactive settings. Similarly, the issues of self, identity, and subjectivity can be more concretely scrutinized by situating the analysis in grounded communications.

Moreover, when it comes to non-conversational linguistic data, most scholars construct their arguments by analyzing lyrics, regardless of disciplinary backgrounds (Banavoritch 2003; de Kloet 2010; Groenewegen 2011; Jones 1992; Moskowitz 2010). This selection of textual material often implicitly assumes that (a) lyrics *reflect* the ethos existing in broader social structures, and studying lyrics, therefore, allows us to learn more about society as a whole; and (b) the meanings of the lyrics are taken up or interpreted by the listeners in similar ways, which facilitates the social production of ideologies, musical genres, and cultural identities. A primary limitation of this lyrics-oriented method is that it confines the objects of inquiry to text-internal traits of cultural products. Therefore, this method often overlooks the fact that meanings about the music

itself and its reception can be generated and circulated in a much larger social domain through the process of social and semiotic mediation of the original lyrics, as well as through other verbal and textual forms of language use with regard to music.

Concerning the previously established limitations on China's alternative music scenes, this chapter compares the ideologies of rock and experimental music following three basic analytical perspectives. First, it draws upon the idea that language matters in music worlds by focusing on "language about music" (Feld and Fox 1994; Feld et al. 2004), which notes that "music and language are phenomenally intertwined and socially dialogic" (Feld et al. 2004: 340) with an emphasis on "the social indexicality and cultural symbolism of discourse about music, rather than abstract cognitive semantic domains" (Feld and Fox 1994: 32). I take this linguistic anthropological perspective in order to demonstrate that the social production of musical experiences is crucially facilitated through language that is used to frame these experiences. In the context of Beijing's experimental music scene, this perspective is especially useful: music produced there is often purely instrumental and hence does not include internal text, but its textuality and discursivity are involved in how people talk and write about it.

Second, this chapter discusses the effects of music ideologies by analyzing "what does text do," which I see as a departure from the use of text as only a way to reflect ideologies in broader social contexts. As Faudree suggests, this way of treating texts can "decenter texts as a core unit of analysis, while providing the tools for examining them holistically and assessing their relative importance (and unimportance)" (Faudree 2012: 520). Ethnographic research following this agenda of looking at the productive aspect of text, such as Inoue's (2006) work on the discursive formation of "women language" in

Japan,⁴⁰ shows the strength of this approach. In this chapter, this theoretical and methodological concern is used to analyze how ideal subjects are discursively produced in online posts advertising musical events in various ways.

Third, this chapter treats musical genre, style of participation, and music-related cultural identity as processes that are formed through dynamic communication, instead of as static categories. As Bucholtz and Hall suggest, identity can be studied by “interactional positions”; that is, they state that identity “*emerges* in the discourse through the temporary roles and orientations assumed by participants” (2005: 591). Specifically, the online posts examined in this analysis belong to the first step of interaction that can be read as “interpellation” (Althusser 2006) – promoters and organizers of musical events strategically hail those potential audiences before the show starts, trying to profile them in advance.

4.3 Locales, Genres, and People: Background of Music Ideologies in Beijing’s Alternative Music Worlds

Before analyzing online posts announcing musical events held at the School Bar and XP, it is useful to provide some background information regarding these two venues and D-22, the predecessor to XP.

4.3.1 Background 1: Maybe Mars and D-22

In April 2006, D-22 was opened by Michael Pettis, an American professor of finance at Beijing University who previously worked as a banker on Wall Street and ran a pub in the East Village of New York. According to Michael,⁴¹ by opening D-22 at

⁴⁰ In her book, Inoue shows how the texts in magazines teach women to speak “women’s language” that originally does not exist in their actual social lives (Inoue 2006: 27).

⁴¹ I have chosen to use his first name without any honorific titles because that is the name he goes by in the music circle.

Wudaokou, the geographic center of more than fifteen universities,⁴² his aim was to provide young rock bands with more chances to perform. In terms of this standard, D-22 was definitely successful, for it attracted and fostered many new faces in Beijing's underground music circle with its widespread reputation for being friendly to young musicians. In addition, it quickly became a much-celebrated spot for rock fans who, at that time, did not have many choices nearby.⁴³ In 2007, Michael founded Maybe Mars, a record label that sponsored several bands who performed regularly at D-22. Maybe Mars' first wave of releases in the same year acquired impressive success. In particular, the sudden emergence of two bands – Carsick Cars and Snapline – has been identified by many independent music fans and critics as a phenomenal event due to the bands' novel musicality.

The noise rock band Carsick Cars has been at the core of Maybe Mars' band list, and importantly, the three members of the band (Zhan Shouwang, guitarist and vocalist; Li Qing, drummer; and Li Weisi, bassist) have also been active figures on the front line of Beijing's experimental music scene not long after they first appeared as alternative rockers. In part because Snapline and Carsick Cars share two members (Li Qing and Li Weisi), Maybe Mars' fans I interviewed consistently note that the general musical preference of the label is closer to experimental music than other rock labels in China.

4.3.2 Background 2: Zoomin' Night

Maybe Mars' orientation towards experimental music is made manifest by its support of Zoomin' Night, an experimental music project launched by organizer Zhu

⁴² Due to its indispensable importance, Wudaokou has also been humorously noted by nearby university students as “the center of the cosmos.”

⁴³ Another bar that specializes in underground rock is 13 Club, which was established earlier. In part because 13 Club focuses more on heavy metal, its audience has been smaller compared to other more musically comprehensive sites.

Wenbo in August 2009 and held every Tuesday night at D-22 (and at XP since 2012) for the five years since. A typical concert of Zoomin' Night starts at 10 at night and lasts 60 to 90 minutes with three to four sets of performances carried out successively. Sometimes after the scheduled performances, musicians regroup and improvise together. In part because Maybe Mars does not charge Zoomin' Night to use D-22, the operation of Zoomin' Night has few financial obstacles, which helps make it the most stable experimental music performance group in Beijing. Importantly, several members of Maybe Mars' bands are regular Zoomin' Night performers, which closely ties the company to the experimental music project. According to Zhu Wenbo, the organizer of Zoomin' Night, since its inception, the ethos of this project has been to "offer chances for anyone who wants to try something new."⁴⁴ In short, the ways in which Zoomin' Night is organized is largely influenced by a music ideology that emphasizes experimentation with and openness to musical expression.

Zoomin' Night consists of a small circle of performers with dense interpersonal ties. I will show that these musicians highly valorize sincerity and mutual familiarity with regard to music, which constitute the music ideology that underlines both music production and the ways of talking about music. The pleasure of engaging in experimental music derives not only from musical performances, but also from the interpersonal closeness constructed through these practices that are enacted via a representational economy (Keane 2002) of signifying practices about music, including online posts.

4.3.3 Background 3: Nianqing Bang

⁴⁴ Interview with Zhu Wenbo, June 2013.

When D-22, XP's predecessor, was in business (2006-2012), the venue was frequented not only by members of the experimental music scene, but also by an important group of young people who identify themselves as Nianqing Bang. Literally, Nianqing Bang means "Gang of Youth," but the working English translation used by group members is "Gang of Gin" (which primarily appears on the Internet and is rarely used in verbal communications). Nianqing Bang consists principally of fans and friends of Joyside, an old-school punk band established in 2001, and signed to Maybe Mars in 2007, and disbanded in 2009. Joyside was heavily influenced by the 1970s punk scene, and their music is characterized by many as forthright and energetic but decadent. Much like the style of the subjects of Hebdige's (1976) classic theorization of British youth subculture, the style embraced by Nianqing Bang is not only seen through their musical taste, but also systematically shapes their clothes, languages, and ways of interacting. Since disbanding, the members of Joyside have been actively engaged in the music scene with new projects. Thus, the widely mourned ending of the band did not break up Nianqing Bang. Instead, nostalgia for Joyside often mobilizes the participation of Nianqing Bang in new events. Another symbolic mobilizer of Nianqing Bang's activity is the recurring trope of drinking, which other rock music fans recognize as a well-known trait of the group. For the members of Nianqing Bang, linguistic references about alcohol, like actual alcoholic drinks, are indexical signs that point to a sociability specific to them.

4.3.4 The Division of Jam-packed D-22: Mysterious XP and Bustling School Bar

In its heyday, the tiny, two-floor, boxlike D-22 was often tightly packed during weekend gigs performed by well-known bands. In contrast, D-22 was less well attended when hosting more free-style musical performances that were valorized by Michael, D-

22's owner. He said in interview that it became irritating to him that a growing number of patrons of D-22 were more interested in its non-musical activities, such as drinking, than the music itself. In part due to this conflict, Michael closed D-22 in early 2012 because he felt the venue "attracts the wrong kind of crowd."⁴⁵

In contrast to D-22's university-surrounded geography, its successor, XP (or xiaoping in Chinese, both of which are used often), is located near the core circle of Beijing's alternative music venues. After XP was established, Maybe Mars relocated its offices to the second floor of the venue, right above the performance area. To many fans of Maybe Mars and D-22, the establishment of XP was a mysterious process. A couple of months before its opening in June 2012, XP did not have a name, and the address of "the new site" was still unclear to most fans. Since its opening, there has been no official explanation of what XP stands for on its website. I was also confused until I learned from Deng Chenglong, the manager of XP during fieldwork that the two letters were taken from the English word eXPerimental. Zhang Shouwang, the leading musician of Maybe Mars, suggested the name XP, demonstrating that its new name aligns with the refocused musical orientation of the venue. But this new agenda, drawn up in the name of music, has been practiced in more than purely musical ways. The management of XP controls the publicity of the venue through a range of strategies that ensure a mid-level attendance within the space. For example, Maybe Mars always arranges the concerts of the company's more popular bands, such as Carsick Cars, Snapline, and PK14, at other larger sites in order to avoid overcrowding XP. However, sometimes it is particularly challenging for the XP team to ensure an appropriately-sized crowd because of the tension between both wanting to promote the performances and limit the size of the

⁴⁵ Interview with Michael Pettis, July 2013.

audience. As Deng Chenglong, the current manager of XP in charge of all daily operations, told me, Michael once asked him to “go make enough people here, but it shouldn’t be too much.” His solution was to promote a three-day show by using the title “Maybe Mars’ Mysterious Performances!” with some extra lines suggesting the quality of the bands without revealing the real names of any of them. Another interesting factor that challenges the staff’s ability to achieve the ideal popularity for XP is the service of alcohol. Unlike many bars in the Drum Tower area, the number of types of alcohol served at XP is exceptionally small. For example, in the summer of 2013 when I did my first fieldwork, the only available beer at the venue was a modest version of Tsingtao, a mundane Chinese brand recognized nationwide. In an indirect but effective way, this limited selection of alcohol serves a music ideology that tends to rule out exciting but “non-musically focused” activities (echoing Michael Pettis’s reason for closing D-22). In short, XP is run in a way by which its publicity and musical preferences are tightly controlled.

The School Bar (“School”) was opened in December 2012, six months after XP. This music-based bar was co-founded by several people, one of whom is Liu Hao, the former bassist of Joyside and current member of three other bands much loved by Nianqing Bang.⁴⁶ Liu Hao also acts as the barkeeper for most gigs. Thus, to many of School’s audience members, grabbing a bottle of beer, gin, or whatever drink Liu Hao hands over is an oft-shared moment in their participation at this bar. In contrast, at XP there is no such a highly involved insider of the music circle who works at the bar counter. Instead, the manager, Deng Chenglong, acts only as the sound mixer for most concerts. There is also a greater variety of drinks served at School than at XP. Additional

⁴⁶ The three bands are Casino Demon, The Dancers, and Lone.

differences between School and XP extend to the inner decorations. School is a brighter venue, literally “illuminated” by Nianqing Bang – an eye-catching neon board hung right above the bar counter that reads “Nianqing Bang” in Chinese characters and flashes all night. In comparison, the interior of XP, except the stage, is a much gloomier space with only dim lighting. Moreover, as I mentioned earlier, the musical orientations of the two places are different—unlike XP, but like many other event locales in Beijing, School holds a variety of musical events. In addition, in clear contrast to XP, which rarely has punk gigs, School frequently organizes special events just for punk – oftentimes, more than five bands perform in a roll in one night. Moreover, after D-22 closed, School quickly became the preferred venue at which members of Nianqing Bang hang out, while it is rare to see Nianqing Bang’s bands perform at XP. To summarize, in the post-D-22 period, its successor XP moved forward with a more focused orientation toward experimental musical and has been operated to maintain a moderate crowdedness. School, another new venue established later than XP, significantly inherited the musical genre and related modes of enjoyment that had been formed by Nianqing Bang, a core group of D-22’s participants.

4.4 Producing Genres through Language: Data Analysis

In this section, I will analyze four online posts that were circulating on the Internet during my fieldwork. The posts are from Douban, the most popular site on which to post information of coming music events in China. The first part of my analysis compares two posts by School and Zoomin’ Night, respectively.

4.4.1 “Drunk is a beautiful night” at School

The first post (“Post 1”) is an announcement of a gig held at School. One of the most noticeable characteristics of this post is the extent to which it frames the upcoming show. By describing the imaginary scene with details of season, weather, temperature, scents, drinks, participants, gendered forms of participation, and the authenticity of music, the post offers an affective pre-enactment of the performance.

Post 1	
醉生梦死的夜晚 Vol.2	Drunk is a beautiful night Vol.2
	[Night of Intoxicatingly Living and Dream-likely Dying Vol.2]
1. 我们故意把这次 Drunk is a beautiful night 安排到 7 月最后一个周六，	1. We <u>intentionally</u> arranged this “Drunk is a beautiful night” to the last Saturday of July,
2. 因为那会儿北京正是最热最燥的时候，	2. because it’s the most scorching and driest time of Beijing,
3. 那就让它再燥点儿，姑娘们嫌太热把衣服穿到最少，小伙子们更是要汗流浹背，	3. so let it be drier, girls wear the least if it’s sweltering, guys get as perspiring as possible,
4. 满屋子散发着荷尔蒙的气味儿。	4. the house is entirely filled up with the scents of hormones.
5. 要知道 School 可不放暑假，学生们也全出动了，可以彻夜不回家，	5. Be aware that School doesn’t have summer break, and students have gone into action, hanging out all night,
6. 纯正的摇滚乐就着冰镇大啤酒是暑期的最佳选择。	6. authentic rock’ n’ roll going with cold beer in tall bottles is the best choice of summer holidays.
7 月 27 日周六晚九点，School 学校酒吧	July 27 (Sat). 9pm, School

The Chinese title of this performance, *zuishengmengsi de yewan* (醉生梦死的夜晚), literally means “A night of intoxicatingly living and dream-likely dying.” “Drunk is a beautiful night” was the English translation supplied by School to advertise the event. Had a denotationally accurate translation been the School’s goal, the description “A glorious night of drunken debauchery” might have been selected. But this was not the aim of the post. To most Joyside fans and regular customers of School, it was common knowledge that this title is a transformation of the name of Joyside’s 2004 *Album Drunk is Beautiful* (which is originally in English without Chinese translations). Thus, the announcement enacts a successful act of reference by poetically playing on the album title.

Recalling that Joyside and Nianqing Bang have established a well-recognized style of both music and participation, it can be argued here that a gig’s title significantly sets its general style. Through the metapragmatic emphasis, “we intentionally arranged” (line 1), in a post that would be read by many actual participants, the post justifies its casting of the event. “Let it be drier” (line 3) and the lines that follow it further call for certain types of participation through providing specific descriptions (lines 3-4) and discursively categorizing the ideal subjects and bodies of the audiences. Reacting to the fact that the venue is hot, girls take off their clothes (presumably because their bodies are more susceptible to overheating and are in need of relief); guys, in clear contrast, enjoy the sweatiness and delight at gazing at scantily clad girls.⁴⁷ By playfully troping on “school” and “summer break” (line 5), the post promotes the School Bar by linking the venue to a broader social domain, calling for more student participation. Two intensifiers

⁴⁷ It is noteworthy that, syntactically, the descriptive lines after “let it be drier” do not have subjects, nor they follow the structure of “let...” (therefore share the implicit subject of we)

– “authentic” and “best” – embedded in the rhetoric of the last sentence (line 6), together with the “beer in tall bottles,” an iconic image in the history of Chinese rock, further legitimize the gig as to be worth joining.

It is not my goal to say that what is described in the text actually happens in this scene. Nor is it my intent to claim that those who later join the performance participate because of this call. Rather, the focus has been to show that to event promoters, what is important is the pragmatics of the sign forms in pre-event promotion and how they are framed, both linguistically and meta-linguistically. I argue that the text is organized around two characteristic statements. The first is about expectation – it is crucial to characterize what will happen, and the essence of participation is to meet these expectations. The second is about expansion – it is an agenda to intentionally call for more participation and to promote the venue itself, which is largely realized by mobilizing the promised expectations. These two features constitute a music ideology that underlines a form of embodied participation and heightened/altere d states rather than the music itself. The following analysis of a part of a post for XP shows that the two venues similarly have embraced “live participation,” but that there are many variations with regard to deeper concerns about what participation should be like.

4.4.2 Three Freaks -- Zoomin' Night at XP

In contrast to “Drunk is beautiful night,” in which the main text of the post focuses on framing the imaginary specifics of the gig without offering textual description to the bands, Zoomin' Night's post (“Post 2”),⁴⁸ written by the organizer Zhu Wenbo, primarily attends to the musicians for that day. As is shown, the format of the post is quite straightforward: it consists of an introduction to three musicians and one paragraph

⁴⁸ <http://www.douban.com/event/19092266/>

Post 2

6月25日 怪逼三人行

盛迪，湖北人，即兴乐手，采样，人声，真乐器，啥都来。刚刚组建了即兴计划“汨”

<http://site.douban.com/dee/>

<http://site.douban.com/mii/>

Glass Bricks，澳大利亚人，氛围音乐家

<https://soundcloud.com/glass-bricks>

Faasst，怎么说呢，他的乐队很有名，可以排进最近五年口碑最好的中国摇滚乐队 top 10 了，当然了这也算不得什么。最近他开始尝试做个人项目，Faasst 就是这样开始的。试听没的听，但从对他各方面的了解来看应该还算靠谱

Zoomin' Night June 25. Three Freaks

Sheng Di, from Hubei, improvisational musician, sampling, vocal, real instrument, everything. Just organized an improvisational project Mi.

<http://site.douban.com/dee/>

<http://site.douban.com/mii/>

Glass Bricks, from Australia, ambient musician

<https://soundcloud.com/glass-bricks>

Faasst, how to say... his band is very famous, and it can rank in the top 10 Chinese bands in the past five years according to their reputation, but that's not a big deal. Recently he started his solo project, and that's how Faasst started. No trials available, but based on the understandings of him from different perspectives it will be in tune.

(or sentence) for each. The descriptions of the first two performers are arranged similarly, sequentially showing each musician's name, region, a few keywords characterizing the music, and links to websites for recorded samples.

The third one about Faasst, however, is presented in an obviously different way. The paragraph begins with “how to say,” which immediately personalizes the narrator of the sentence and adds a conversational sense to the sentence. The first half of the second sentence shows that Faasst is a solo project carried out by a male, who has a recognizable musical persona as a member of a widely known band. The narrator’s subsequent comment “but that’s not a big deal” casually denies the importance of his reputation gained from the band. The seemingly repetitive sentence (“Recently he started...”) in fact contains a metapragmatic structure by noting “that is how Faasst started.” In doing so, the second part of the sentence explains the first part with a subtext, or reminder: “it’s enough to know the sheer fact that it is started.”

Finally by noting that no trial is available, the last sentence resonates with the format used in above descriptions of other musicians. At the same time, it offers a compensatory cue for evaluating the quality of Faasst’s performance. Importantly, the cue centers on the person himself, and the word choice of “different perspectives” is a comprehensive portrait of Faasst not only as a musical persona, but also as a real person whose non-musical characteristics matter.

The real person behind the persona of Faasst is Li Weisi, and the band alluded to in the post is Snapline, one of Maybe Mars’ most beloved bands in which Li Weisi plays the bass. Recall that Zoomin’ Night has been supported by Maybe Mars with many of its band members being the regular performers of the project. Thus, unlike the other two performers in the post, Li Weisi has long been an insider of Zoomin’ Night. Moreover, before the post was put online, Faasst’s real identity as Li Weisi was known to most insiders, such as core musicians who often performed at Zoomin’ Night, but not to

audiences and less involved musicians. In terms of Peircian semiotics, it can thus be argued that the “grounds” for interpreting Faasst as a sign (sign-vehicle) vary greatly between core musicians and other groups of participants. Without reading sentences after the subtitle “Faasst,” those who know what this sign points to are already able build the connection between the persona and the person. Therefore, for these acquaintances, the rest of the introduction becomes another type of narration that does not function to illustrate the identity of Faasst. Rather, these sentences become a series of playful commentaries on the basis of the mutual familiarity between core musicians. However, to the readers who are interested in the performance but do not have this insider background, these same sentences are not purely playful text. Instead, the sentences temporarily join the “ground” the readers have had about Zoomin’ Night and its musical practices, which may initially help them figure out the real identity of Faasst.

The two forms of reputation juxtaposed in the same paragraph receive very different evaluations. First, the reputation of Li Weisi’s band is mentioned at the beginning of the paragraph but is immediately repudiated. Second, Li Weisi’s reputation as a real person is brought into play by the author, and specifically, it functions as an indexical to the credibility of his musical performance. On the surface, this juxtaposition shows Zoomin’ Night’s obliviousness to the mainstream rock scene, but what seems more fundamental here is that the post presumes the existence of two distinct musical zones – Chinese rock on the one hand, and the zone where Faasst performs on the other. This presupposed structure is important because the extent of Li Weisi’s reputation as a real person is increased only through the co-existence of his “unimportant” reputation as being a member of a top-ranked band. In other words, this effect on establishing his

reputation would not have been possible without the comment in the first sentence, and vice versa. Each form of reputation acquires its intensified co-textual meaning only within a comparison.

The above discussion of the Zoomin' Night post has focused less on its "literal meanings" than on how these meanings are framed through rhetorical and metapragmatic arrangements. In contrast to what is presented in Post 1, Zoomin' Night's post does not mention the specificities of its live performance. Nor does it intensively link itself to those established and predictable tropes by relying on the intertextuality with other texts created earlier. The celebrated sociality in School's post is crucially marked by the collective participation in a musical performance in certain ways. Zoomin' Night's post also reflects its concern about interpersonal interactions mediated by musical activities, but this sociality seems to be of a different kind from the School's. Rather than the pleasures obtained by a collectively constructed atmosphere, the subtle joyfulness involved in Zoomin' Night derives from the small-scaled familiarity in both musical and non-musical terms. Second, by omitting a detailed description of what the musical event will be like, this post indicates the importance of unpredictability embedded in the music ideology of Zoomin' Night.

4.4.3 Two More Posts of Zoomin' Night

Like most of Zoomin' Night's posts, Post 3 does not have a thematic title – the working title is only about time and performers.⁴⁹ The introduction to Quan Xin, the second musician mentioned in the post, also follows the format used by the first post analyzed above. The most interesting part is the first paragraph about Chai Delin and

⁴⁹ <http://www.douban.com/event/19183622/>

Mou Jianhua,⁵⁰ a young couple from Los Angeles that has been actively engaged in Beijing's music scene under Alpine Decline, their experimental rock band. It is not difficult to notice that in the first paragraph, the author describes many details about the musical practices of the couple in their non-musical lives. The post offers a partial preview of the performance by revealing the new instruments that the two musicians will use. On the other hand, it still maintains the mystery of the performance by ending the

Post 3

柴德林与牟建华, Alpine Decline的两个成员, 7月9日会在燥眠夜做一次非Alpine Decline的演出——Alpine Decline最近处于暂停状态, 因为他们的小宝宝几个月后就要降生了, 不过柴牟夫妻俩也没闲着, 他们最近在家里尝试用合成器和磁带混响效果器, 玩一些别样的东西。这个组合与吉他与鼓的Alpine Decline是怎样的关系? 演出之前谁也不要枉下结论。

和他们一起演出的是权欣, 他是信马游疆、汨、Chaos 等乐队的吉他手, 那天他会做一些个人的项目。

Chai Delin (Jonathan) and Mou Jianhua (Pauline), two members of Alpine Decline, will carry out a non-Alpine Decline performance – Alpine Decline is currently suspended because their baby will be born in a couple of months, but the couple Chai and Mou are not idling, recently they were using synthesizers and tape echo chambers to play something different. What is the relation of this group to the guitar-and-drum Alpine Decline? No one should make arbitrary conclusions before the performance.

The one who will join the performances is Quan Xin, he is the guitarist of bands such as Xinmayoujiang, Mii, Chaos, etc. He will do some solo projects on that day.

⁵⁰ These are Chinese names of the two American musicians they sometimes use in China.

narration with a question and the suggestion of “not answering it arbitrarily” before the performance. Although the rhetorical style of this paragraph is different from the one about Faasst, the characteristics listed about are consistent with the two themes I highlighted in above. First, the attempt to involve the couple’s personal lives in a post announcing musical events resonates with the emphasis on mutual familiarity. Second, by drawing on a question-answer structure at the end of the paragraph, the post makes a clear claim about the importance of unpredictability in actual participation. However, as is shown, this unpredictability does not mean that the post does not reveal anything about the show. Reading the post from the perspective of Austin’s speech act theory (1975), the question-answer utterance itself has a performative effect of underlining what should be noteworthy about the coming concert (i.e., how the couple’s new project differs from the one that has been known by many) and what modes of participation is expected at the concert (i.e., being there with an open mind to music).

Similar to what we have seen in the first two posts of Zoomin’ Night, Post 4 provides only minimal information about the musicians in a highly structured and parallel format.⁵¹ However, it differs from the other two because it offers a general portrayal of the performance before introducing the three (male) musicians. The performance is thus organized in a way that takes the three musicians as a whole, instead of three separate units like the “Three Freaks” post does. This textual arrangement has its grounded context: all three of the people mentioned in the post are core musicians of Zoomin’ Night. They know each other well in person and perform regularly at XP (and formerly at D-22): Wang and his band played at Zoomin’ Night as early as 2009, the first year of the

⁵¹ <http://www.douban.com/event/19131598/>

project and Deng and Zhu are the manager of XP and the organizer of Zoomin' Night, respectively.

Post 4

独奏 二重奏 三重奏
幽暗的 暴力的 抒情

王子衡，天津人，乐队成员，个人项目主要演奏次中音萨克斯；
邓成龙，武汉人，小火车心乐队成员，多种乐器演奏小能手，个人项目主要使用吉他；
朱文博，青岛人，肥城/小红与小小红乐队成员，现在是一个黑管乐手。

Solo duet trio
Gloomy violent emotional

Wang Ziheng, from Tianjin, member of Ice-seller, mainly playing the alto saxophone in individual performances.

Deng Chenglong, from Wuhan, member of Mini Train Heart, young multi-instrumentalist, mainly using guitar in individual performances.

Zhu Wenbo, from Qingdao, member of Fat City and Little Red and Little Little Red, is currently a clarinetist.

The actual performances of that day started with Deng's electronic guitar solo improvisation, and was followed by Zhu's clarinet solo, Wang's alto saxophone improvisation, the duet of Deng and Wang, the duet of Zhu and Wang, the duet of Deng and Zhu, and finally, the trio of three instrumentalists. They literally exhausted the possibilities of combinations, which would not have been possible had they not had

interpersonal familiarity cultivated by shared musical experiences. The fact that no recorded sample is provided can be read as a sign of the presumption that no previews of music are necessary. Thus, unlike the expansion trope in the post written by School, the pleasure in Zoomin' Night's musical events comes from a more intimate sociality constructed through mutual understanding in terms of both music and people. Finally, this post only predicts the performances by using six words (three music terminologies; three descriptors of music), creating a sense of unpredictability similar to the Post 3.

4.5 Conclusions

In contemporary China's alternative music scenes, the classic rock and roll tropes of authenticity and rebellion (especially the former) are still valued by many as important in evaluating a band's musical reputation. At the same time, the once socio-culturally marginalized rock music has undergone a significant shift to one that is increasingly celebrated by urban youth under the name of "independent music." Nevertheless, the popularizing embrace of the "independent and authentic" musical expression of the everyday is susceptible to be integrated into the mainstream. This fragility comes in part from music-external factors with regard to the socioeconomic conditions and the cultural politics of urbanite youthful participants. Yet this chapter has shown that the rise of rock-based independent music is also impacted by the encouragement of "expansion" embedded in the genre's music ideology.

The musico-ideological concerns underlying the post by School primarily focus on expectation and expansion. Under this rock-based music ideology, the preferable mode of participation consists of the enactment of preliminarily formulated specificities. The interpersonal closeness is encouraged as in the experimental music, but it is a

collective one that is presumably open to larger audience base. These two crucial features not only appear in one of School's posts, but also prevail in contemporary China's rock-based alternative music scenes. On the part of the organizers, for example, the predictable actualization of certain signs, sounds, visions, and activities has been naturalized as essential in the promotion of musical events ranging from large outdoor music festivals and smaller live concerts. On the part of fans, there is an equivalent form of pleasure that comes from realizing the desire created prior to performances on the basis of expected events. After the gig of any well-known band, for example, the casual conversations among fans would repetitively discuss how imperfect the show was because certain songs were not performed on stage. In this situation, cultural producers often find themselves sandwiched between the paradigm of organizing and the mentality involved in participating. Conflicts therefore emerge for musicians when their famous songs need to be unceasingly repeated (arguably, in very alienating ways) to meet the expectation of sincere fans, as well as organizers' requirement for expansion. Therefore, in enacting expected cultural imaginations and modes of participation, rock-based independent music shows its potential for being repeated as both "stockpiled products" (Attali 1977) and a platform for predictable ways of social interaction. It could be further argued that the primary mode of interaction in rock music ideology is more likely to be trapped by commercial logics due to the preferred agendas of expansion and expectation, two highly visible features of modern consumerism.

Although many forms of experimental music performance do not contain direct semantic meanings, the analysis above has shown that language about this form of "non-linguistic" music is vital for us to understand how it is practiced and enjoyed in certain

contexts. By comparing the online posts of Zoomin' Night and the School Bar, I highlight small-scaled intimacy and unpredictability as two primary elements of the music ideology of Beijing's experimental music scene. In terms of mode of participation, it is through these two characteristic features that musicians of Zoomin' Night differentiate themselves from other musical genres and claim their own. In both the musical world and the non-musical one mediated by musical practices, this music ideology also produces remarkable closeness among participants of experimental music performances. Compared to the rock music scene in the same city, the attempts made by experimental musicians to destabilizing performances are noteworthy, for they offer alternative forms of sociality in musical practices that are hard to be reproduced in an alienated manner.

To sum up, this chapter is an attempt to add new perspectives to the problematics on China's music-scape by looking at the linguistic production of musical genres. I have shown that although embodied cultural practices – in this context, actual participation – are important in reproducing independent music culture, these practices have undergone ideologically framed linguistic mediations before they occur. By closely examining the micro-level semiotic dynamics involved in the genre-making process, this chapter provides two implications for understanding contemporary Chinese independent music culture. First, in addition to reading Chinese rock and independent music as authentic, subcultural, and rebellious, it is useful to look at the forms of social interaction and modes of participation legitimized and encouraged by different music scenes. By linking musicality with sociality, this chapter observes that the articulation and the social reproduction of musical genres are deeply related to the ideological concern of how music is supposed to be enjoyed in social interaction. Second, as a supplement to

scholarship that asks, “what is the music?” I suggest an approach that attempts to answer “what does the music ideology ask participants to do?” and “how do they do this through communication?” This approach enriches the understanding of not only the production of music, but also the production of ideal subjects who emerge in the process of enjoying music. Lastly, by examining the way in which concert organizers attract audiences through the structures described here, this chapter touches on the interactive mode of identity formation mediated by texts. The analysis indicates that texts circulated in the field of cultural practice are not only reflective, but also productive due to their power in interpolating new subjects.



Figure 4.1 Vagus Nerve (Li Jianhong and Wei Wei) and Josh Feola performing at Zoomin' Night (XP, 2013.12.24 Photo by author)



Figure 4.2 He Fan and Liu Xinyu performing at Zoomin' Night (XP, 2013.6.4 Photo by author)



Figure 4.3 Deng Chenglong performing at Zoomin' Night's 5th anniversary concert (XP, 2014.8.9 Photo by author)



Figure 4.4 Zhang Shouwang performing at XP (2013.6.4 Photo by author)



Figure 4.5 Wang Ziheng performing at Zoomin' Night (XP, 2013.7.2 Photo by author)



Figure 4.6 Zhu Wenbo performing at Zoomin' Night (XP, 2013.7.2 Photo by author)



Figure 2.7 Inside the School Bar (2013.6.30 Photo by He Shu)



Figure 4.8 Chui Wan performing at XP (2013.5.18 Photo by author)

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

5.1. Taste Matters! The Birth of A New Personage Among Chinese Youth

On a summer night of 2003, Zhang Shouwang, who is now known as the frontman of China's leading noise rock band, Carsick Cars, stayed up all night at a Beijing park and made up his mind to start a great rock band of his own. A few hours before this idea came to him, he was watching a live performance of Joyside, a prominent old-school punk rock band in China's alternative music scenes in the 2000s. In October 2008, He Fan and Liu Xinyu, two eighteen-year-old young men, ran into each other at a gig named "Four Guitars" in which Shouwang was one of the four guitarists. They exchanged phone numbers and Douban accounts. Half a year later, they started informal rehearsals. Switching to the summer of 2013, He Fan and Liu Xinyu have become associated musicians for Zoomin' Night, a regularly held experimental musical event. Sometimes they show up as Deadly Cradle Death, their experimental hip-hop duet, while other times they perform individually or as members of different music projects. Zhao Cong and Zhu Wenbo, members of the experimental duo Little Red and Little Little Red, met in 2009 at a Hot and Cold concert. They started their own project later, released two albums, and got married on the fifth anniversary of that concert. During my fieldwork, I was constantly told stories like these in which ordinary concert-goers turn into engaged practitioners. It is also not uncommon to hear similar accounts in the cases of other cities in China.⁵² This

process of transformation suggests that contemporary China's independent music scene can be regarded as an ecological system-like cultural milieu sustained by the reproduction of its subjects.

Wenyi youth is a language to describe the members of this growing group, especially those non-practitioners who connect each other through shared aesthetic preferences and collective experiences of enjoyment. I showed that the majority of these youths are well-educated only children who have grown up in middle-class urban families, and the formation of their cultural taste is conditioned by the socioeconomics and historical specificities of post-socialist China. What is more important, however, is that this taste develops a rationale that articulates the incongruity of social life. It is music and other artistic-cultural objects circulated through technologies of mediation that help cultivate this rationale. In the process of contextualizing music and the related ideology from other cultural contexts, certain intellectual efforts are required in line with the pleasures of listening. Therefore I argued that the vogue for independent cultures includes a duality of intellectuality and entertainment. The embrace of *wenyi* contains pleasures that often cannot be easily expressed elsewhere in institutions. It is a cultural practice participated by amateurs who teach themselves how to have fun.

Besides this self-taught competency of enjoyment, the cultural taste also develops into a framework of thoughts consisting of dichotomies between ideal worlds and an uneventful school life, between independent thinkers and uncritical followers. I showed with ethnographic examples that such a framework of thoughts acts in many situations as an ideological mobilizer that guides actions in real life. Taste for independent music also forms an indexical relation between the choice of cultural products and personality,

⁵² An example is Hu's thesis on Shanghai's independent music scene (2011: 49).

worldview, etc. In a nutshell, taste matters. The embrace of independence witnesses the birth of a new personage among the Chinese youth: youth who celebrate aesthetic experiences and turn such experiences into rationales used in making sense of everyday life.

5.2. Independence, Resistance, and Individualism

This thesis critiques a narrative of contemporary Chinese independent music fans' participation as merely having fun without any concerns on "resistance." I have shown that in events such as going to independent music concerts, they have willfully done much in order not to be absorbed into certain ways of living that they perceive as insipid. It is hard to think that this does not count as resistance at all, if we take the verb "resist" as an act of withstanding. However, this form of resistance is remarkably different from the trope of resistance in earlier underground rock scenes, whose members are more likely committed to grand narratives of social change. Neither the intellectualized joyfulness nor the enjoyable intellectuality ignites strong desire for epic modifications in reality. The willful detachment from the uninteresting mundaneness is more of a tactic of retreat than an active enthusiasm for having dialogues with society. Young subjects in the trend of independent cultures are more interested in carving out individualized, ideal, new worlds than seizing power from existing authorities. Instead of changing those unexciting parts of social reality, they are more inclined to maintain an independent status that allows them to do something different.

To be sure, it is not useful to compare which one counts as real resistance. The point here is that young participants of the current independent culture are more inclined to start their "resistance" from the politics of everyday life on an individual level. This

tendency has valuable meanings for urban youth due to its honest concerns on the individuality specific to one's situation. However, it is possible that, if the majority of participants treat this taste as something only about personal life, the trend would end within the taste itself, which makes it unlikely to bring social changes in public issues. The new dichotomies in the discourse of independent culture would also yield narcissism, if *wenyi* youth put an end to their reflections on everyday life and treat themselves as distinct subjects from all other social groups without seeing the complexity of social life.

5.3. Sociality, Replication, and the Future of Independent Music

In Chapter 4, I argued that the form of sociality encouraged in music ideology is an important basis for the production of both the music genre and its subjects. Although I only discussed one rock-based independent music concert, my observation is that this case reflects a prevalent rationale in promoting live performance in the current rock-independent music scene altogether. Most independent music promoters incorporate what I called “expansion” and “expectation” tropes in the textually mediated information that frames the concert. These two tropes, especially the expectation, have also been taken as standards for evaluating the quality of a performance. It is quite clear that the dynamics of the spectatorship in most indie gigs can be summarized as: audiences are satisfied when they see what they expect, which requires musicians to replicate what is expected. Admittedly, repetition is an art in itself because it requires great physical and emotional investment from musicians, especially those in popular bands with more performance contracts. Nonetheless, the fact that the popularity of independent music is based on such repetitiveness leaves some questions for future research: if the pleasure of joining independent music concerts primarily comes from realizing what one anticipates, then

what is the difference between these performances and those “mainstream” ones produced by the popular music industry? Through what logic is the participation in the latter criticized by many *wenyi* youth as mindless “consumption?” Moreover, in the post-Olympics era, as the state encourages the cultural and creative industries in a seemingly authoritative way, how should independent music practitioners maintain their independent status?

This thesis initiates an inquiry of the behaviors and rationales of contemporary urban Chinese youth by interpreting their cultural practices. As the sociopolitical context and the economics of cultural production keep transforming – as it did in the post-socialist decades when *wenyi* youth grew up – the ways in which young agents participate in independent cultures will change accordingly. As *wenyi* youth growing up to be social actors embedded in a more complex web of life-making, their cultural tastes, as well as the ideological framework of perceiving world derived from it, will need to be re-articulated in order to assist in making sense of life.

REFERENCES

- Althusser, Louis
2006 Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation). *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, 86-111.
- Anagnost, Ann
1997 *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China*. Durham: Duke University Press.

2004 The Corporeal Politics of Quality (Suzhi). *Public Culture* 16: 189-208

2008 From 'Class' to 'Social Strata': grasping the social totality in reform-era China." *Third World Quarterly* 29 (3): 497-519.
- Appadurai, Arjun
1996 *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Attali, Jacques
1977 *Noise: Political Economy of Music*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Austin, J. L.
1975 *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford University Press.
- Baranovitch, Nimrod
2003 *China's New Voices: Popular Music, Ethnicity, Gender, and Politics, 1978 – 1997*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Boellstorff, Tom
2003 Dubbing Culture: Indonesian Gay and Lesbi Subjectivities and Ethnography in An Already Globalized World. *American Ethnologist*. 30(2): 225-242.
- Boyer, Dominic

2012 From Media Anthropology to the Anthropology of Mediation *In* Fardon, R., Harris, O., Marchand, T., Shore, C., Strang, V., Wilson, R., and Nuttall, M. (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Social Anthropology*. 383-392.
- Bourdieu, Pierre

- 1984 *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bucholtz, M., & Hall, K
2005 Identity and Interaction: A Sociocultural Linguistic Approach. *Discourse studies*, 7(4-5), 585-614
- Cameron, L., Erkal, N., Gangadharan, L., and Meng, L.
2013 China's Little Emperors: The Behavioral Impacts of China's One-Child Policy. *Science*. (339): 953-957.
- Campbell, Jonathan
2011 *Red Rock: The Long, Strange March of Chinese Rock and Roll*. Hong Kong: Earshaw Books.
- Chow, Yiu Fai and de Kloet, Jeroen
2013 *Sonic Multiplicities: Hong Kong Pop and the Global Circulation of Sound and Image*. Intellect Ltd.
- Chumley, Lily Hope
2011 *Self-styling: Practicing Creativity and Remaking Aesthetics in Post-socialist China*. PhD Dissertation. University of Chicago.
- Gerth, Karl
2010 *As China Goes, So Goes the World: How Chinese Consumers Are Transforming Everything*. New York: Macmillan.
- Groenewegen, Jeroen
2011 *The Performance of Identity in Chinese Popular Music*. PhD Dissertation. Leiden University.
- Farquhar, Judith and Qicheng Zhang
2012 *Ten thousand things: nurturing life in contemporary Beijing*. MIT Press.
- Faudree, Paja
2012. Music, language, and texts: Sound and semiotic ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 41, 519-536.
- Fonarow, Wendy
2006 *Empire of Dirt: The Aesthetics and Rituals of British Indie Music*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press
- Fong, Vanessa
2006 *Only Hope: Coming of Age Under China's One-Child Policy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press
- Fox, Aaron.

- 2004 *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-class Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Feld, S., & Fox, A. A.
1994 Music and Language. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 23(1), 25-53.
- Feld, S., Fox, A. A., Porcello, T., & Samuels, D.
2004 Vocal Anthropology: From the Music of Language to the Language of Song. *In A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, 321-345.
- Foucault, Michel
1972 *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. A. M. Sheridan Smith, trans. New York: Pantheon Books.
- 1990 *An Introduction*, vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality*. Robert Hurley, trans. New York: Vintage-Random.
- Hall, Stuart & Jefferson, Tony eds
1975 *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subculture in Post-war Britain*. Routledge.
- Hebdige, Dick
1976 *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. Routledge.
- Hu, Leye
2011 *Independent Voices: The Education Lives and Music Imaginations of the Post-1980s Generation*. MA Thesis. East China Normal University. (独立的声音 : 80 后的教育生活和音乐想象)
- Inoue, Miyako.
2006 *Vicarious Language: Gender and Linguistic Modernity in Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jones, Andrew
1992 *Like a Knife: Ideology and Genre in Contemporary Chinese Popular Music*. Ithaca: Cornell University East Asia Program.
- Jin, Zhaojun
2002 *Pop In the Open Air: A Personal Experience of Chinese Popular Music (光天化日下的流行: 亲历中国流行音乐)*. Beijing: People's Music Publishing House.
- Jing, Jun ed.
2000 *Feed China's Little Emperors: Food, Children, and Social Change*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Keane, Webb.
2002 Sincerity, 'modernity,' and the Protestants. *Cultural Anthropology* 17: 65–92.
- Kipnis, Andrew
2007 Neoliberalism Reified: *Suzhi* Discourse and Tropes of neoliberalism in the People's Republic of China. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. 13: 383-400.

2011 *Governing Educational Desire: Culture, Politics, and Schooling in China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- de Kloet, Jeroen
2010 *China with a Cut: Globalisation, Urban Youth and Popular Music*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Kraus, Richard Curt.
1989 *Pianos and Politics in China: Middle-class Ambitions and the Struggle over Western Music*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Li, Cheng ed.
2010 *China's Emerging Middle Class: Beyond Economic Transformation* Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Lin, Jing, and Xiaoyan Sun
2010 Higher Education Expansion and China's Middle Class. In Li, Cheng (ed.), *China's Emerging Middle Class: Beyond Economic Transformation* Washington DC: Brookings Institution. Pp. 217-242.
- Liu, Fengshu
2011 *Urban Youth in China: Modernity, the Internet and the Self*. Routledge.
- Mazzarella, William
2004 Culture, Globalization, Mediation. *Annual Review of Anthropology*. (33): 345-367.
- Moskowitz, Marc
2010 *Cries of Joy, Songs of Sorrow: Chinese Pop Music and Its Cultural Connotations*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

2013 *Go Nation: Chinese Masculinities and the Game of Weiqi in China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Novak, David
2013 *Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Ong, Aihwa
2006 Neoliberalism as exception: Mutations in citizenship and sovereignty. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Osburg, John
2013. *Anxious wealth: Money and morality among China's new rich*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press.
- de Seta, Gabriele
2011 *Mediation Through Noise: Experimental Music in China*. MA Thesis. Leiden University.
- Shi, Ningzhong and Haiming Liu.
2007 Quality-oriented Education: Fundamental Objective and Implement Approach (素质教育的根本目的与实施路径). *Educational Research (教育研究)*, (8) 10-14.
- Silverstein, Michael
1997 Encountering Language and Languages of Encounter in North American Ethnohistory. In *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 6(2): 126-144
- Sun, Yi
2012 *Rock and Roll China*. Taipei: Showwe Information Co. Ltd.
- Suzhi Education Task Team
2006 The Concept, Connotation and Related Theory of Quality-oriented Education (素质教育的概念、内涵及相关理论). *Educational Research (教育研究)*, (2) 3-10.
- Yang, Guobin
2009 *The Power of Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ye, Lan
2011 The Status and Reasons of Quality Education Promotion (素质教育推进现状及其原因辨析). *Exploring Education Development (教育发展研究)*, (4)1-5.
- Wang, Jing
2012 *Making and Unmaking of Freedom: Sound, Affect, and Beijing*. PhD Dissertation. Ohio University
- Wang, Qian
2007 *The Crisis of Chinese Rock in the mid-1990s : Weakness in Form or Weakness in Content?* Dissertation. University of Liverpool.
- Zhang, Li

2010 *In Search of Paradise: Middle-Class Living in a Chinese Metropolis*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Zhang, Pei, etc.

2013 A Survey on Current Consumption Situation of the College Students in Beijing. *Journal of Capital Normal University* 34(3): 84-89.

Zhang, Wuyi

2011 When Rock and Roll Encounters Cultural and Creative Industries (当摇滚遇上文化创意产业). *Arts Criticism(艺术评论)*, (1) 76-79.

2013 Legitimization, Marketization, Commercialization: Midi Music Festival's Thirteen-year Development (合法化、市场化、商业化—迷笛音乐节的十三年发展之路). *21st Century (二十一世纪)*, (10) 107-122.

Zhao, Jianwei

1992 *Cui Jian: Screaming in Empty-handedness (在一无所手中呐喊)*. Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press.

Websites

<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1675626,00.html>.

http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2004/10/04/8186784/index.htm

http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNzM5NDI3NzY=.html

<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/11/china-has-hipsters-too/264414/>

<http://weibo.com/1713926427/xupNwpYuZ>

<http://www.douban.com/event/19092266/>

<http://www.douban.com/event/19183622/>

<http://www.douban.com/event/19131598/>