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Performance space and independent music: The role of cultural entrepreneur in music placemaking in China

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Abstract
The digitalization and platformization of pop music (e.g. Tencent Music Entertainment and Netease Cloud Music in China or Spotify) and gentrification of urban space, not to mention political control, have threatened the survival of independent music in global cities. This paper aims to illustrate how musicians attempt to create music space and continue to incubate new bands and sustain a performance economy in order to perpetuate local creativity and music cultures. We argue that all these efforts are owing to the rise of cultural entrepreneurs in China who attempt to strategize to create a music market and withstand political pressure from the authorities.

Keywords
Indie music, China, music placemaking, incubation, global connection

This article investigates how independent musicians have created new avenues for creative and economic survival in an era where music is increasingly commodified and consumed on a streaming music platform in China, the world's second-biggest digital music market (worth US$3579 million as of 2022) (Statista, 2022). Due to border restrictions, musicians' survival in the Chinese market is particularly difficult. Global audiences outside China cannot access most albums on Chinese music apps, while few Chinese musicians are able to plug their songs on global music platforms. Within China, the two main music platforms, QQ Music of Tencent Music Entertainment (TME) and Netease Cloud Music are owned by tech companies Tencent and Baidu, respectively; listed on New York Stock Market, they both answer to investors' commercial interest. When the

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commercialization of copyrighted music emerged in conjunction with legalized music platforms in China in 2015 (iResearch, 2019), it was idealized that such platforms, together with the burgeoning live-streaming services and karaoke platforms, would facilitate creation and add to the revenues of independent musicians who were paid for their copyright (Netease, 2020). This was particularly important for independent, or "indie," musicians who lack the support of big music corporations and labels. Despite the fact that there has been a slight increase in income for independent musicians (Netease, 2020), the survival of 200,000 independent musicians who are contracted to music platforms that largely feature mainstream artists is at stake. First, musicians have a very limited choice of online platforms to release their music in China, particularly in the 2020s, since music platforms have consolidated and only two major players, namely, TME and Netease Cloud Music, are left in an oligarchical market (Zhang, 2022). Second, while existing music platforms continued to absorb independent musicians, these musicians were generally low-paid, with the exception of the most downloaded (interview with a manager of a music label selling music to China's music platform, 1 April 2022). A study of TME has shown that self-releasing musicians earn a meager income on digital platforms, and the platform algorithms of the platform only serve to data-ify the activities of the musicians, monetizing them and prioritizing the profit of the platform over musicians in China (Qu et al., 2021).

Music placemaking

Against the backdrop of the intricacies of independent musicians' lives and the highly commodified nature of the digital music business, which does not favor independent musicians, we would like to highlight the recent cultural phenomenon of digitalization and urbanism: over the last decade, musicians have become more dependent on digital (music and social media) platforms without realizing that they have been reduced to material labor that increases the velocity of capital circulation (Mahmoudi and Levenda, 2016). This article, then, explicates how musicians attempt to regain their autonomy as creative laborers by seeking out alternative paths to survive, produce, and connect with an audience. We describe a scenario that goes against the digital trend, namely that of musicians reverting to live performances to reconnect with and make themselves known to the audience. With this recent return of music space from virtual to live, we center our argument on the place of music, which Andrew Leyshon et al. (1998: 4) referred to as "spatialities of music," and the mutually generative relations of music and place. Coherent with Casey's (1993) idea of "getting back into place," the article explicates why and how musicians have been able to return to physical spaces from the digital environment for music making, circulation, and engagement with fans in the Chinese context. What we have seen are musicians who not only experiment in and with real, living places to create new collective experiences with an audience, but also create new spaces for music in cities, a phenomenon we call music placemaking. While "placemaking" originated in urban and planning studies to describe how local resources are made use of and capitalized on to promote wellbeing, create identities, and initiate social change, in this article, we describe the expanded concept of "creative placemaking," which fosters belonging for empowerment, community formation, and cultural stewardship in addition to describing the concrete moments and nature of music creation, production, and performance (Webb, 2014). Admittedly, the materiality of music and the symbolism around it are of vital importance in China and have undergone drastic political and economic changes. However, the story of how music is performed in indoor performance venues (frequently dubbed with a locally derived English idiom "livehouses") and music festivals, which are co-constructive of the city space and important as a cultural politics of place (Papadopoulos and Duru, 2017), if not a social movement, is often untold.

Today, a visible phenomenon seen across Chinese cities is that musicians inventively and boldly convert urban premises to livehouses and grassland to stage performances, thus expanding the currency of music places.

In our research context, Beijing offers an effective example of music placemaking, as livehouses, despite encountering setbacks including closure in some cases, have gradually evolved into a relatively stable music–space ecology. Moreover, Beijing was chosen as the site of the study because it hosts more live performances than any other city (Li et al., 2020) and is also home to organizers of music spaces. Besides, among those cities (e.g. Wuhan, Chengdu, and Guangzhou), which are known for their vibrant music scene, Beijing is historically the cradle of Chinese rock and hip-hop music and thus a focal point for musicians from all over the country.

Methodology and reflection

Research data was collected using a mix of formal and informal methods. The authors have frequented Beijing's music scene over the past 15 years. We have met owners of performance spaces, directors of music festivals, and musicians, and, long before this study was undertaken, we have been mingling with musicians, music directors, and owners backstage and in the bar. Formally, we conducted multiple in-depth interviews (lasting 1.5–2 h) between 2019 and 2022, mostly in participants' offices, in livehouses, or adjacent coffee shops. The study period was prolonged due to the frequent closure of performance spaces during the pandemic. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Because of the uniqueness of each interviewee, the data were not systematically coded to identify patterns. Rather, important episodes, analyses, and opinions from these interviewees were quoted in this article. Because some of the data are very sensitive as this involves negotiation with the state and business deals, we deliberately removed some of the unnecessary details in the quotes to protect the interviewees.

The interviews we conducted in Beijing were mainly with 12 musicians who are owners and decision-makers of major performance venues and music festivals. They are all males aged 30 to 40, and all of them have been active in Beijing the music scenes for the last 15 years. Ours is the first study to generate first-hand original data on livehouses and festivals in Beijing. In our interviews, we focused on the participants' music business philosophy, their values, and, most importantly, how they engage with Chinese musicians—from a variety of music genres and with varying experiences—to facilitate their performance and creation of music. We focus here on two distinctive music livehouses, School and Jiangjingjiu in Beijing, and two major music festivals, Strawberry and Midi Music Festival. We also gathered and compiled industry data based on public reports and first-hand information (e.g. performance schedules, musicians' incomes, and business strategies adopted by music festivals) from these music livehouses and music festival operators.

While our study makes use of rich data, our reflexivity in the research process should be noted. We are music lovers, and we feel we belong to the music circle in Beijing. The advantage of this is that we have the full trust of the musicians and owners of music livehouses and festivals and were able to use some insider data for this research. However, we are aware that our viewpoints can be influenced by the musicians and operators we interviewed and the information they supplied to us. Thus, our arguments and attempts to elucidate the intentions behind the operation of these livehouses and music festivals are counterchecked against public reports and responses elicited from music audiences (in interviews and blogs kept by audience members).

Cultural entrepreneurship and performance venues

Given the political and economic context of China, the agents who carved out the space were not just musicians, but what we call "cultural entrepreneurs," who emerged from a context-specific music culture. As cultural entrepreneurs, they must manage the forces from outside—mainly the state regulations and market—and the forces from inside organizations—in which stakeholders have diverse goals and agendas so that the enterprises driven by the entrepreneurs can maintain their dynamics for change while not overly upsetting the equilibrium (Swedberg, 2006). While having their own individual values and sense of creativity, cultural entrepreneurs share the characteristics of emerging from the creative communities, working collaboratively with the stakeholders, and in the domain of cultural industries, they are able to blur the boundaries between consumption and production (Wilson and Stokes, 2005).

In this article, we attempt to identify the roles these cultural entrepreneurs play in the development of independent musicians. In China, specifically, cultural entrepreneurs need to have a deep understanding of the industry and market and, more importantly, be able to extract economic value from the space, performance, and musicians to ensure the space is financially sustainable. They are cultural actors who form a bridge between music novices or "DIY musicians" and wider music ecologies that are both commercially challenging and ideologically restrictive. In our case, these intermediaries engage in a form of geographical interventions (Leyshon et al., 1998: 29) in the process of placemaking; they seek economic value (c.f. Perry et al., 2015)—as these livehouses still face survival problems—but also non-economic value and extend music performance as a social practice to different spaces in Beijing and across China. More complicated than this task, however, is the role of cultural entrepreneurs in steering a kind of music culture or underground culture that is always considered problematic and controversial by the authorities, as the very act of innovating the cultural market of indie music intersects with domains of cultural politics, namely class, gender, subcultural ideologies, generational differences, and most importantly, real politics, particularly in the specific context of China. The ability, tact, and experience of these cultural entrepreneurs in connecting and networking with musicians and negotiating with the authorities are all vital. The intrinsic quality of cultural entrepreneurs in making the geographical intervention would eventually shape the alternative music culture, ethically, politically, aesthetically, and pragmatically (Oakley, 2013).

As illustrated in previous studies (e.g. Fung et al., 2022), although the digital music industry in China is vibrant, it mainly supports mainstream popular music and can even be detrimental to independent musicians, as it continues to absorb young musicians without guaranteeing their livelihood or artistic survival. At the same time, the increasing globalization—and gentrification—of Chinese cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou offers a glimpse of hope for independent musicians. This globalization has brought about an increasing cosmopolitanism of big global cities and a rising demand for nightlife and music scenes. In Beijing, based on our observations, independent musicians, or DIY production and distribution, are seen depending on the new creative forms of performance and local sites in the form of livehouses, live bars, and open-air music festivals for survival and growth. These physical spaces, however, do not exist in the form of large stadiums or concert halls; they are simply empty spaces often without any fancy decoration and sophisticated ventilation. These spaces could be a dungeon, an old courtyard converted space or a floor on a commercial building. What is common across these spaces is that there is a stage equipped with a proper sound system and lighting for performance (our own observations). They serve as nurturing grounds for musicians. Beyond the indoor space, there are public, unused public spaces converted for more popular and established music groups to perform under the banner of Woodstock-like music festivals, including the famous Midi and Strawberry Festivals, that could extend the business chain of music. All these spaces and new modes of cultural production have significantly reduced reliance on sales of digital music and albums. This new mode of business is sustained, incubated, and driven by new social music spaces and, more importantly, cultural entrepreneurs, the cultural agents and resourceful visionaries who

set up these new spaces to innovate new value chains to enhance the sustainable growth of musicians (Blaug and Towse, 2020: 193). These cultural entrepreneurs require awareness of potential exploitation in the market, at least in the digital music market, and be able to generate revenues and arbitrage involving new channels, new products, new processes, or a combination of these (Blaug and Towse, 2020: 196). Owing to these cultural entrepreneurs, music producers, singers, and bands can re-focus their effort on creating music and improving by rehearsing and performing in these venues. In a more competitive urban space and complex sociopolitical environment, and as global culture looms, such cultural intermediaries not only revive the music culture in these urban locations. The local music culture produced also enhances local creativities that are representative of non-official voices and agendas.

Livehouses as performance spaces

Based on the public information reported in news, we estimated in 2018 that 261 livehouses existed in China, clustered in seven regions, namely North China (including Beijing), East China, South China (including Guangzhou), Central China (Wuhan), West China (Chengdu), and North East China (see Figure 1). Beijing has more livehouses than any other city with a total of 24 livehouses identified as

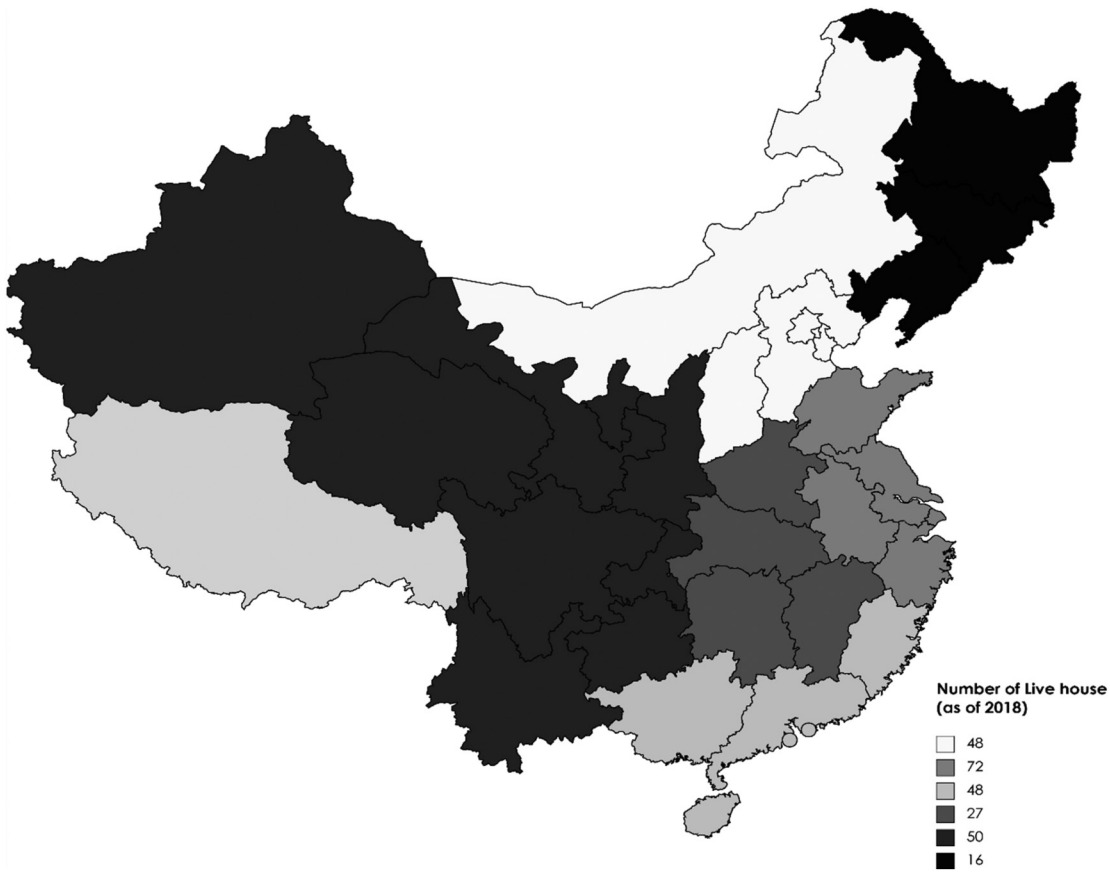

Figure 1. Distribution of music livehouses in China (as of 2018) (data collected and figure created by authors).

early as 2004 (Yugongyishan being the first livehouse). Of course, the trajectories of development of livehouses have not always been smooth. In 2007, because of the Beijing Olympics 2008, the former Yugongyishan underwent compulsory demolition and relocation. In 2015, one of the most important livehouses, MAO, was closed, although a new MAO Livehouse was soon established. In 2012, the iconic D22, which had generated well-known punk bands including Joyside, Hedgehog, AV Okubo, Carsick Cars, Bridstriking, and A Residence, was closed due to pressure from the property owner, according to the founder, Michael Pettis (Josh, 2012).

One very important music scene in Beijing is School, a music bar founded in 2010 in an old hutong (alley), where it started to develop as a tourist spot where visitors could understand and reminisce about the old Beijing. While restaurants, coffee shops, and bars are burgeoning in the district, a performance space disguised as a bar requires constant negotiation with the authorities. Fei Liu, who grew up in a courtyard in which families of the People's Liberation Army lived, is the owner of the live bar. As a teenager from a privileged background and yet constrained by a strict family, the very act of choosing to lead a nonmainstream music career and lifestyle represents symbolic resistance and challenge against the status quo and authorities. According to Liu, the venue's chosen name of School symbolizes that he and his partners would become the principals and practice a new type of learning, pedagogy, and development—that are not taught in the current, problematic system—for the students, who are would-be musicians (interview with Liu, 28 September 2017). Quoting from the public understanding that "School is a punk bar," he explained that School is indeed imbued with the spirit of punk, with everyone looking for freedom and expression of their own personality with the equality, purity, and honesty that Chinese society currently lacks. That philosophy is also crucial in the operation of this small livehouse, as it always operates as the trial or debut stage for music bands and also runs an incubation program, SuperMaster Label, for junior bands.

We conducted multiple interviews on the rooftop of School, where Liu explained the difficulties of operating a performance space in an area that was initially a residential district (although School now attracts many petit shops, cafés, and restaurants). The first issue is the nature of music. Obviously, Liu had to face political pressure, as rock, indie, or punk intrinsically signifies defiance, insubordination, and resistance, both for him and for the people it attracts. Second, to survive financially, School was designed as a bar in which the sale of liquor and wine provides an additional source of revenue to subsidize performances that take place on a small stage in a room with an audience capacity of 100 and are not held every day. During the pandemic, whenever cases of COVID-19 were discovered in the district, School's performances had to be canceled. Based on the list of performers given by Liu, 275 sessions were performed

Table 1. Music genres performed in School in 2017 (tabled curated by authors; figures are based on School's list of performances).

Genres performed	Number of events that feature the genre
Punk	61
Indie Rock	47
Alternative	31
Rock	26
Hardcore	20
Campus Rock	19
Hip-Hop	15
(Jam)[a]	14
Experimental	12
Post Rock	12

[a]Jam is an event in which different bands perform together regardless of the genre.

in School in 2017, most of which were indie rock (47 sessions), rock (26 sessions), punk (61 sessions), and alternative (31 sessions), and the bands came from cities across China (see Table 1). Punk bands performed most frequently, including Russian Roulette (12 times), Free Sex Shop (10), and Day Dream (8).

In terms of music placemaking, Liu explained that the live bar was established for the sake of extending the music community's interest in underground and alternative music and, more importantly, the spirit of freedom. Music placemaking for School, then, is not just raising a flag to champion non-mainstreamness, but practically and actively incubating musicians and music audiences. Liu himself manages bands, including a well-known band, Penicillium, which has been featured in *China Daily*. The name carries the subtle meaning that music is fungible and organic, a philosophy that is coherent with the name of the livehouse: School. Penicillium began performing in front of fewer than 10 people in School but has since acquired a fan base of 100,000 followers (Chinadaily.com, 2020). During our interview with Liu, one repeated theme concerned growing an audience that has a collective experience. Apart from music placemaking to anchor the band in School, where the audience meets the musicians, Liu emphasized the need to give the band exposure to boost their popularity, finetune their skills, and consolidate their audience.

Jiangjingjiu, a medium-sized livehouse established in 2005 with an audience capacity of around 200, is the next-up venue for aspiring musicians. Jianghingjiu was originally the title of a famous poem by Bei Li during the Tang Dynasty of China. It describes how the poet Li indulged in drinking to conceal his hidden grievances against society and politics. The fact that this performance venue has the same name symbolizes its significance as a sanctuary for the younger generation in China, who are mostly not allowed to express their real emotions in public. In the early days, Jiangjingjiu largely featured folk-rock bands, as the venue could not afford the more sophisticated musical instruments required by other genres of music. In 2014, in the name of cleansing the unregulated city, the authorities erected high walls in Beijing's old district of Drum Tower to fence off the ruined hutongs and the square inside them where Jiangjingjiu was located. Its closure is also an example of how fragile a music space can be in the capital.

In 2016, Jiangjingjiu was relaunched as Omnispace Jiangjingjiu in a more central location that accommodates 600 people. Hence, this livehouse was able to serve a larger audience and occasionally invite small overseas bands to target the mixed population of Beijing, whose city center is home to more than 90,000 foreigners. Financially, Omnispace's income came from a mix of performance and drink sales. At this point, Zuoye, the person in charge of Omnispace, played a critical role as a cultural entrepreneur who could balance the need for financial sustainability and artistic integrity. As the owner of Jiangjingjiu, Ping Wang, was a rapper and musician but not a businessperson. He relied on Zuoye to liaise with artists, curate the performance, carry out promotions, and search for a viable business model (interview with Zuoye on 8 July 2021). Zuoye underscores the essence of the expansion of Jiangjingjiu in relation to music placemaking. Like Liu at School, Zuoyue argues that livehouses are the colosseum where musicians experiment, perform, accumulate experience, engage in exchanges with the music community, and sharpen their skills by performing in public. When musicians reach a certain level of fame or skill, they yearn to move to play in larger venues. The old Jiangjingjiu was precisely this: the next step in the venue chain for aspiring musicians. As Zuoye said, the music community has expanded significantly in recent years, and he noticed that there has been a stronger demand from both audience and musicians in terms of performance spaces where the audience meets the musicians. Omnispace then serves as a larger stage that nurtures the more experienced underground and indie bands in Beijing. Yet, when bands have to attract more fans and larger audiences, they need a bigger stage, and, since 2012, there has been a growing and vibrant market of performances at music festivals.

Music festivals as performance spaces

For mature and better-known underground bands—mostly rock (indie, campus, post, and alternative rock) and punk (including hardcore, post, and math punk)—music festivals are the natural way to reach a larger audience. Since China's music festivals began with the Heineken Rhythm 99 Summer Music Festival in Ritan Park in Beijing in July 1999, they have become important annual events symbolizing the vivacity and dynamism of a city, especially in a period when China, or, at least, the socialist market aspect of it, has been open to the world. The Midi Music Festival, organized by Mid School (established in 2000), and the Strawberry Festival, organized by Modernsky (established in 2007), are the top festivals in China. The philosophy, background, and role of the cultural entrepreneurs who invented these festivals are important.

Lifei Shen initially founded Modernsky as an independent label for indies in 1997. Around 2002, we met Shen in a small underground studio producing their own and other musicians' music. It was a period in which indie music was not able to reach out to audiences, and Modernsky was reported to have huge financial debts. It was not until 2007, when Modernsky experimented with live shows to bring music bands face to face with audiences in livehouses and music festivals, that ticket sales began generating a fair income for bands. In the past, with livehouses as the sole performance space, however, the revenues of (and competition between) thousands of bands in China were limited. Progression to a larger stage and the higher revenue it attracted could significantly increase a band's income. Our interview with Shen revealed that, after years of being nourished for public performance, successful bands with a huge audience across the country can earn up to 10 million RMB a year (interview with Shen on 28 May 2017). As an organizer of the leading music festival in China, cultural entrepreneur Shen has developed a business model that largely relies on commercial and city sponsorship. Public figures from 2017 reveal that at least four angel and investment funds have injected 240 million RMB into Modernsky, which was seen to be running this growing music performance market. Despite the commercial nature of the festivals, our talks with Shen and some of the Modernsky bands confirmed that music bands remain relatively autonomous in terms of freedom of production. It is true that Modernsky has a three-year contractual relationship with 70 bands, but their relationship with these bands is loose. Bands are allowed to terminate the contract if their expectations are not met (interview with Shen on 28 May 2017). We can probably conclude from this that a sustainable business model for creating a space for public performance also supports bands. Whereas music festivals are newfangled, highly profitable cultural businesses, and thus copied by many operators across China, Shen appears to represent a case of a cultural entrepreneur being a musician-cum-entrepreneur by balancing culture and business.

Another major music festival in China is the Midi Music Festival, operated by the Beijing Midi School of Music and established in 1993. This music placemaking is an exemplary case to explicate the delicate balance between culture and politics inasmuch as the Midi School is a noticeable and unpretentious statement of the spirit of rock music. Dean and owner of the School, Fan Zhang, is known for launching the first "rock school," which was also the first formally registered modern music school in Beijing. Unlike most conventional music schools, which focus on the learning and teaching of classical music and traditional Chinese musical instruments, the Midi School invites overseas teachers and well-known local musicians to instill a love of rock, blues, and jazz instruments in the younger generation. Zhang always highlights the mission of the School, which is more than just teaching youngsters to play rock and jazz (informal discussions with Zhang in 2018). Our interpretation is that the intrinsic spirit of rock, namely creativity, criticality, defiance, and expression, is what youngsters can take from Midi School. Though Zhang did not go into detail on this subject, the formation of the School itself is political: the State Administration for Foreign Expert Affairs, the Office for Foreign Affairs of the Beijing Municipal Government and the Committee of Education, and the Beijing Municipal

Bureau of Public Security are all involved in monitoring and approving the operation of the School (Beijing Midi School of Music, N.A.).

The formation of the Midi School and Modernsky that mainstream rock music is the first level of politics. The second level is the negotiation of music festivals between a city, which sponsors the festival, and the operator. At this point, we would like to address the misperception that the authorities do not favor music performances. It is true that establishing a permanent space for performances could occasionally draw huge crowds, incite radical thoughts, or attract media coverage that describes possible chaos, non-order, or areas that are not under state jurisdiction. However, the organization of a music festival that lasts for three to five days, under rigorous monitoring, would lower the politics of risk remarkably. Yet, acting as the patron of music festivals, providing physical space and land for the event, and supporting the cost of logistics and security, could be an effective and quick way for a city to boost local tourism, and in the long term, when the brand is established, it will significantly boost the city revenue. In our interview with Shen, organizer of the Strawberry Music Festival, he clearly stated that the very first step in organizing a music festival is to negotiate with the city authorities. The negotiation is not just in terms of logistics and ticket revenue sharing model, but the extent of political censorship, the level of security needed, and what bands can or cannot be invited. Besides big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, second- and third-tier cities (such as Taihu and Zhenjiang) seeking to revive tourism would welcome collaboration with organizers. Clearly, the political risk of organizing music festivals in smaller cities is lower. To a certain extent, music festival organizers and the city patron work together in a symbiotic relationship to ensure a safe festival, politically and financially, to be organized.

Of course, music festival anchoring at a specific city site is not without political risk. For the authorities, as all music festivals feature the city (or are named after the city), the city mayor has to shoulder all possible political consequences from festivals. For example, music festival participants, including in China, are always said to celebrate the romantic culture of freedom, democracy, equality, and love, as evidenced by their clothing (e.g. T-shirts bearing English slogans or logos signifying resistance and love), which, ironically, the authorities pretend not to see. Thus, it is commonplace, at every music festival, that uniformed local security guards stand near stages and campsites to prevent the formation of mobs, stop political mobilization, and subdue radical behavior.

It is equally dangerous for the organizers when the performance does not unfold according to the approved scripted rundown. The most controversial event was probably the Taihu Midi Music Festival in 2019 when the 10th Midi Award was bestowed on the Pink Floyd supporter and independent musician Zhi Li, who was banned by the authorities for his "inappropriate behaviors." The charge against Li was allegedly due to his drug addiction and because he had written songs mocking China's censorship, according to media reports (which were also banned by the authorities). When the award was announced, police and public security under the command of the Cultural Bureau of Jiangsu Province entered the Midi campsite searching for products, promotional materials, and T-shirts insinuating support for Li. In response, the audience sang Li's song in public to protest against this suppression. Four months after the event, the Taihu site for the Midi Festival was permanently dismantled. These political consequences affected the organizer when they negotiated the organization of music festivals in new cities. In sum, the specific model of organizing a music festival anchored in a city or a collaboration between city authorities and musicians walks a tightrope between imposing strict ideological boundaries: tightening the ideological control would drive away participants while giving musicians more autonomy might result in performances trespassing the red line of the authorities and hence risking state intervention. Tipping the balance can easily jeopardize the company operating the festival and the entire music ecology.

The rise of independent musicians

Ostensibly, when cultural entrepreneurs in China operate large-scale music placemaking for music festivals, they bear all the political risks in exchange for viable and sustainable conditions of growth and living for independent musicians. As a matter of fact, as music festivals have gained in popularity in the past 20 years, independent musicians have become more visible than they were in the period when they had no access to big music labels and almost no share of the digital music market revenue.

Before the pandemic in 2022, when China imposed stringent measures on public events, music festivals blossomed, with 140 companies organizing almost 300 festivals per year (Mirror Weekly, 2019). As there is keen competition, only big festivals with strong sponsorship such as Midi and Strawberry were able to make a profit (Mammoth Times, 2021). Nonetheless, unquestionably, musicians are the winners of the growing popularity of music festivals as the younger Chinese generation is more willing to pay to attend such festivals. On 26 December 2017, the CBNData, Damai online (which is one of the largest national integrated ticket platforms for concerts, theater, and sports), and the official China Association of Performing Arts released the Live Performance Consumption Report in China for the first time. This report documented the abrupt increase in the national performance market with ticket revenues increasing from an annual growth of 19% in 2012 to an annual growth of 32% in 2017 (CBNData, 2017). The emphasis of the report is that the expanding live entertainment market generated a record high of 11.9 billion RMB in 2017, partly due to the rise of the middle class in China. In particular, music festival revenues increased enormously, growing by up to 90% in 2016. Music festival-goers are mainly young people born in the 1990s (particularly since 1995) and located in big cities such as Shanghai, Chengdu, Chongqing, and Beijing (see Figure 2). The huge demand from the younger generation also gave cultural entrepreneurs the confidence to launch more music festivals. Tickets could be more expensive. In 2005, when the Midi School organized the 6th Midi Music Festival, the one-day entry ticket was only 30 RMB, but in 2018, the ticket for the two-day Changyang Music Festival organized in Beijing was as much as 800 RMB (Huayi Brothers Research Institute, 2020).

The scale of placemaking and music performance has risen significantly, from performances in livehouses that accommodated a few hundred spectators (e.g. 500 at Mao Livehouse) to music festivals that can accommodate 500,000 people. The indirect outcome is that the livelihood of underground musicians has significantly improved. Without disclosing too much detail, based on internal documents given to us by the Midi School, bands who are invited to perform in music festivals are classified into five tiers, and those in the top tier can receive over 500,000 RMB per performance. This tiered arrangement is also an incentive for independent music bands to grow in terms of their skills, revenues, and popularity.

Cultural entrepreneurs as music incubators

During this study, although we give more clarity about the trajectory of growth of independent musicians, we maintain a critical perspective on the real intention of cultural entrepreneurs. Arranging cultural spaces for music is, in any case, a real cultural business and economic activity, and as School, Jiangjingjiu, Midi, and Modernsky have demonstrated, music placemaking is not unprofitable. However, we have garnered evidence that these musicians-cum-entrepreneurs, from livehouses to music festivals, introduce schemes or "incubation programs" that largely aim to discover a new pool of young, talented musicians to join the music scene (see Table 2). At this point, these cultural entrepreneurs are seen to have a second role as incubators who meet new independent music bands, train them, and enable them to perform on stages that specifically cater to them so they can rehearse and meet their fans. These activities range from recruiting bands from colleges to allowing novice bands to experiment with their music in livehouses.

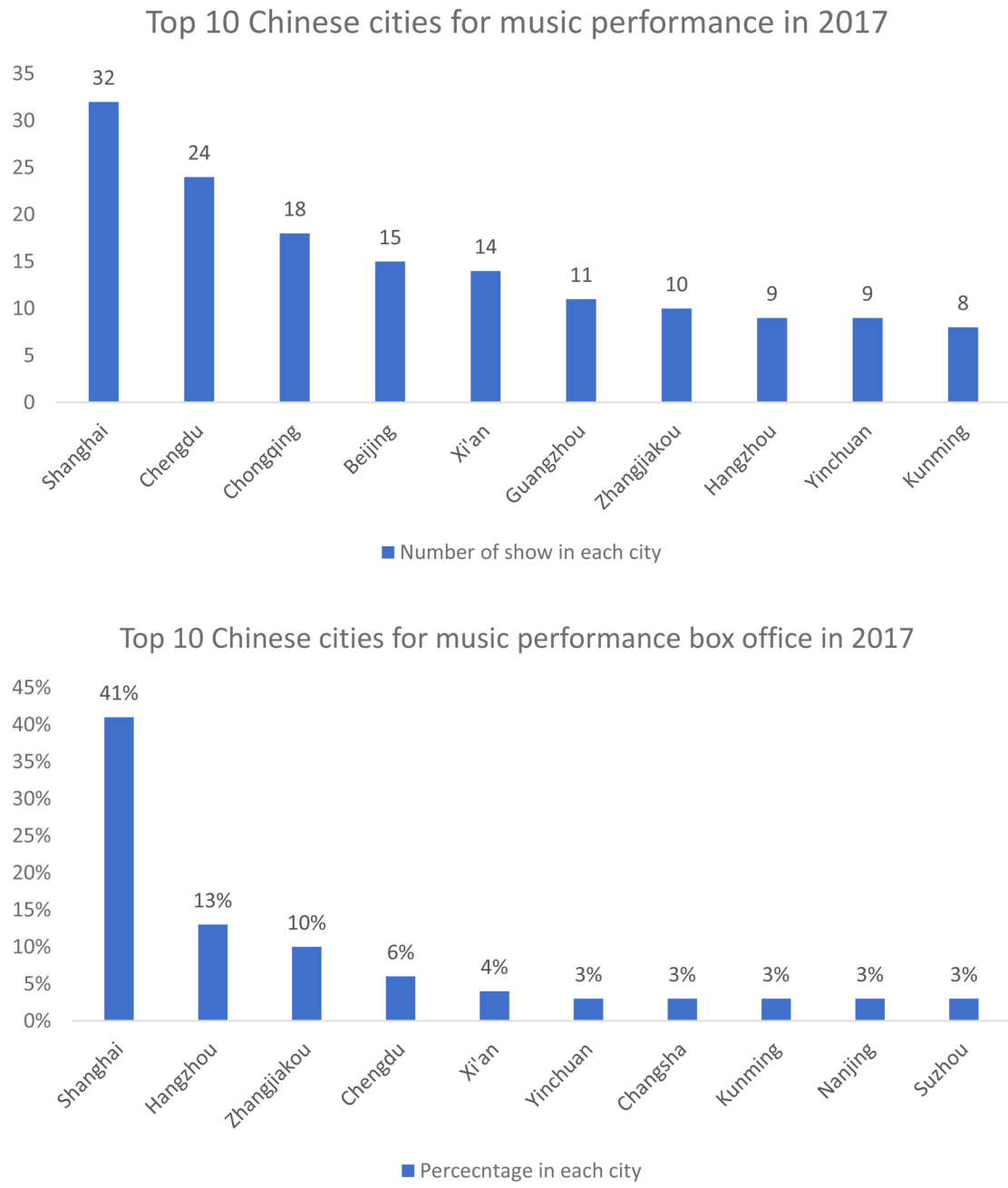

Figure 2. Music performance: cities, number of shows, and box office. Source: CBNData (2017) (translated and re-drawn by authors).

For example, the Xian Le Project ("Xian Le" means pre-music band) of Jiangjingjiu Omnispace was launched in 2017 and enables unknown musicians to "promote their development, and in other words, animates them with the chance of promotion and performance," said Zuoye (interview with Zuoye on 8

Table 2. Incubation programs run by music/cultural entrepreneurs in China (table compiled by authors).

Incubation program	Year established	Founding unit	Year unit established	Nature
SuperMaster	2016	School Live Bar	2013	Curating novice bands' performance in different livehouses across cities
School Through Music	2010	D22	2008–2012	Recruiting college bands and curating their performance on Wednesday nights in different livehouses across cities
Xian Le Project	2017	Omnispace	2005	Enabling music bands to perform in Omnispace and have their performance recorded in the Xian Project; selecting bands to perform solely in Xiao Sessions Performance
Young Blood Project	2017	Modernsky's Strawberry Festival	1997 (music festival launched in 2007)	Recruiting members of the younger generation for music, visual, and design creation and creating a community for online performance and performance at Strawberry Music Festivals
Midi School Promotion Project	2011	Midi Festival	1993 (music festival launched in 2000)	Supporting college bands to create their own music and giving them the opportunity to perform at Midi Music Festivals

July 2021). While more established bands can entice large crowds to Omnispace for their performances at the weekends, novice bands are given the non-weekend peak days to rehearse, experiment, and meet fans face to face. Zuoye said he actively sought to locate these talents in different livehouses and persuade them to join the Xian Le Project. The Project, together with the School's SuperMaster program, which was founded in 2016, the Young Blood Project under the Strawberry Music Festival in 2017, and the Midi School Promotion Project under the Midi Music Festival in 2011, has become a known channel for young and college-aged independent musicians to gain exposure.

Cultural entrepreneurs as global connectors

Overall, music placemaking in livehouses and then music festivals has reflected the changing dynamics of the music locality and given music bands a clear vision and goal. With more than 260 fixed livehouses in cities and annual music festivals across China, live performance itself constitutes a strong and stable cultural economy. When ticket sales reach a critical size, they not only connect Chinese musicians and audiences, but also make it affordable to invite overseas music bands to come to Chinese cities to perform. In other words, ticket sale revenue offers the possibility of extension to the global scene, hence adding a second dimension of politics of place to the analysis. Based on other information gathered from major music festival operators in the period 2015 to 2017, Strawberry and Midi Music Festivals were active in bringing in international bands to perform side by side with local bands. Notably, and expectedly, there were more music groups from overseas in Beijing and Shanghai (211 in total) (see Table 3). Obviously, for organizers of music festivals, incorporating famous independent bands from overseas as key performers and guests in their rundown is a strategy to attract

Table 3. Local (China) and overseas music groups at China's major music festivals 2015–2017 (data compiled by authors before 2018).

	Year	2015		2016		2017	
Name of music festival	City	Number of local Chinese music groups	Number of overseas music groups	Number of local Chinese music groups	Number of overseas music groups	Number of local Chinese music groups	Number of overseas music groups
Strawberry Music Festival	Beijing	—		102	35	—	
	Shanghai	71	37	—		44	34
	Wuhan	34	2	32	2	24	—
	Hangzhou	—		—		31	2
	Changsha	35	3	31	5	36	—
	Chengdu	34	6	46	6	37	11
	Kunming	—		34	3	32	—
	Shenzhen	—		28	9	—	—
Midi Music Festival	Taihu	54	14	69	12	45	12
	Shenzhen (New Year's Eve)	60	7	26	2	36	5
Concrete & Grass Music Festival	Shanghai	23	34	24	36	28	35
INTRO Electronic Music Festival	Beijing	7	3	8	3	8	6
Music, Technology, and Art (MTA) Festival	Tianmo	—		21	8	32	2
Inmusic Festival	Zhangjiakou, Hebei	59	4	67	3	56	—
GreenFest	Chongqing	24	4	—		20	—
	Yinchuan	22	2	16	—	—	
	Kunming	26	1	—		—	

Note: (1) Small-scale city/music festivals (that do not focus on music performance) that do not include overseas music groups (e.g. Simple Life Festival) are not included in this table. (2) There are other music festivals (e.g., Storm Electronic Music Festival, Summer Sonic, etc.), but details of these are not publicly released. (3) Data were gathered from the Modernsky official website and Damai, Yongle, and Show start Ticket Sales Gateway).

audiences. At this point, cultural entrepreneurs play a third role in developing the music scene in China. This attempt to animate global connectivity is unprecedented. In retrospect, in China, only operators who are closely connected to the state could operate or jointly organize concerts for international singers as these operators were allowed to filter content—meaning censorship—and file proper applications to various city authorities for clearance (Fung, 2008: 54–59). Performances by overseas artists in China could be sensitive. For instance, Coldplay's stop in China during their world tour was canceled because it was reported that their song "Chinese Sleep Chant," released in 2008, would politically

backfire as there might be a connection with the founder of the Tibetan Freedom Concert (Twylqx, 2019). Now, the operators of music festivals, including Modernsky and Midi as well as many regional agents acting as cultural entrepreneurs, take the risk of organizing performances involving overseas artists, which has been eye-opening for the Chinese audience. Anchoring the joint performance of local and overseas musicians results in shortening the physical distance between the Chinese musicians and their overseas counterparts and compressing the cultural distance between the global and local music culture. The global extension also goes beyond China.

Conclusion and discussion: From locality to globality

This article explicates, under the highly capitalized online music market, an alternative form of survival and development showing how musicians (re)connect themselves to audiences and the music community in China by performing in music livehouses and music festivals. The phenomenon of what we called music placemaking is made possible by a group of music or cultural entrepreneurs who set up various music scenes in major cities in China. Based on the interviews and given cases, examples, and figures, we argue that music-specific cultural entrepreneurs in China perform the roles of music space makers, incubators, and global connectors.

As music space makers, these cultural entrepreneurs are shown to play a dual role in understanding and developing the music culture and arranging a practical solution to meticulously manage the economic sustainability of the space and the political demands of the cities and the authorities. With a viable business model, they negotiate with the space owners and the cities to reclaim a space in the middle of the city for night-time performances of independent music and extend beyond fixed performance spaces in cities to organize two big national music festivals in China. With these physical spaces to engage audiences, these musicians can choose to escape the precarious labor of being doujin-cum-musicians[1] (rather than musicians) to self-promote themselves or be among the unknown musicians on music platforms dominated by mainstream singers (Arditi, 2021; Mühlbach and Arora, 2020). In the case of China, these newly created spaces have facilitated the formation of a Chinese music culture, a kind of independent rock and punk, that offers an alternative to the mainstream music digital platforms or the mainstream Chinese and international labels. Thanks to the cultural entrepreneurs, the performance economy has slowly taken shape in China—at least before the pandemic.

The consequences are not just physical; they can be ideological. On the first level, the "clubbiness" found in these sites crystallizes organically formed music communities and anchors them in certain music-urban spaces and places, the very existence of which creates autonomy, freedom, and expression (Bennett, 2004). Now, besides the planned socialist economy and the planned spaces of modern cities of China, independent music also has a place/space in the country. Grounding music back in local sites and places addresses the very nature of music, which "takes place in place" and "also takes part in place" (Watkins, 2011: 4005). Music that is experienced and felt is intrinsically different from the semiotics of music pieces that are read and melody and rhythm that is enjoyed. In China in which media and mainstream ideologies are highly controlled, the cultural politics of music places are particularly important. In a relatively politically close-economically growing environment of Chinese societies, the huge digital market is largely created to cater to mainstream musicians who are (self-)taught to navigate the market in a politically savvy way. However, it does not guarantee the content and substance, although diverse forms of music, including hip-hop and reggae, carry romantic, patriotic, and commercial messages (Fung et al., 2022). Independent music, which now has places to grow, has the unique role of widening the political and ideological spectrum of culture and providing the public and younger generations with new possibilities beyond official values and ideologies.

On the second level, although not publicly acknowledged, in the economic and political circumstances of China, the celebration of the performance of punk and rock subtly symbolizes an alternative form of ideologies, such as a potpourri of freedom of expression, rebellion within the state's planned economy, and values of equality under severe inequality, to name a few. As expected, the contradiction between the music community formed and the state is subtle, but it is real. In the context of China—and perhaps in many other nations as well—public performance in any city—is still considered a potential ideological device (e.g. Kirkegaard, 2012). The case of geographical intervention, in this case, has demonstrated that with faith in heart, with a commitment to music culture, and with appropriate strategies, musicians have created a dynamic and growing youth music market/culture that at least is reflective of the potential social conformity. For every new performance, cultural entrepreneurs have to start a new negotiation with the authorities, and formal applications are still required. The long-term consequences of the formation of such a music culture are not insubstantial.

As incubators, cultural entrepreneurs in China set up incubation programs in various music livehouses and music festivals for junior and new independent artists. This is a demonstration of music entrepreneurs' commitment to forging paths for independent artists and sustaining the music community as well as the underground music market and independent and DIY artists. At this point, we feel that former musicians who are now organizers or owners of livehouses and music festivals perpetuate the music culture and space not just for business reasons, but also due to a sense of transcendent kinship through music (Zenker, 2016). At this juncture, other than discovering new musicians, the incubation programs also connect independent musicians of different generations, thus passing the spirit of independent music from one generation to another. While there were no official records or histories of rock music in China in the last generation (in the 1990s), the incubation is a perpetuation and preservation of the collective memory of independent music within the music community.

Believing that music has no boundaries, by scaffolding all these performance stages, cultural entrepreneurs connect local musicians to the audience and to musicians overseas. In this unique case, the connection lies not only in musicality, rhythm, music genres, and the values associated with them that might be universally shared by a community of musicians across the globe, but expanding music performance and music festivals overseas extends the spatiality of music beyond the locality. The connection between locality and globality has significant implications for young people and musicians in China in the long term. As this article illustrates, the important role of these cultural entrepreneurs, at least for Chinese independent musicians, is unquestionable. Yet, we admit that just based on our interviews, it is not possible to unlock all the real attention of these cultural entrepreneurs. It is true that operating livehouses and music festivals could bring them fame and money. The market revenue they generated also imbued that power in the eyes of the officials as music festivals also generate tax revenues. While we maintain a critical and skeptical attitude toward these cultural entrepreneurs, we do see that independent musicians in China have few options. We must acknowledge that given Spotify, Google, Twitter, and Facebook are all banned in China, for musicians and young generation, opportunities to globally connect and acquire music resources are very limited. The global connection created by these cultural entrepreneurs thus temporarily constitutes an avenue for the younger generation to reach out to new values and culture, which otherwise is not possible.

When we started the study, the strategy of music placemaking had been quite effective. However, during the pandemic in 2020–2022 in Beijing, many public spaces, including music performance spaces, were locked down. Some music performance spaces might be permanently banned. This means that the reliance on music placemaking and performance, and empowerment of would-be musicians and younger generations can still be very vulnerable. As to whether music placemaking continues as a viable long-term strategy to extend physical space for music and expand space for musicians to articulate and express their desires, imaginations, and utopia, remains unknown.

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Note

1. Doujin, a Japanese term which is used now by animation/game/comic fans to describe a group of people who share an interest, activity, lobby or DIY practices.

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