

# NEW FORMS OF LIVENESS: EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC IN CHINA BETWEEN PERFORMANCE AND MEDIA

By GABRIELE DE SETA<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*An experimental music scene has developed in China in the first decade of the 2000s, challenging the conventions and orthodoxies of Chinese society and culture. Due to its small-scale audience and its strong presence within new media, experimental music is a well-positioned case study to analyse the dynamics of underground cultural production in the burgeoning economy of the People's Republic of China. This article evidences how experimental music in China employs strategies of mediation through noise in order to experiment with liveness and mediatiation, thus generating new forms of cultural production and communal performance.*

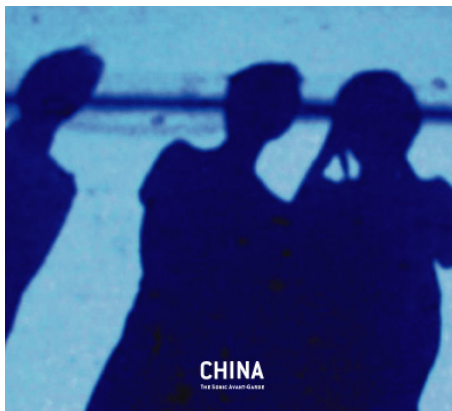
## INTRODUCTION: CHALLENGING THE PARADIGMS

My MA dissertation (de Seta 2011) follows the birth and the development of an experimental music scene in China during the 2000s. I broadly define experimental music as music that transgresses the conventional boundaries of time, harmony, narrative, instruments, identity and space. Experimental music, or *shiyān yīnyuè* 实验音乐 in Chinese, has challenged traditional musical conceptions in many places and different times, pursuing unorthodox paradigms of composition, performance and listening. Since almost ten years, the People's Republic of China has also added its voice into the mix: during a decade of profound social and economical change, a small experimental music scene has flourished in the Chinese underground culture. The birth

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of this experimental scene, as both Groenewegen (2005: 26) and Karkowski and Yan (2007) point out, can be situated between the years 2003 and 2004, when various live events and records confirm the existence of a cohesive community. In July 2003, the Post Concrete record label published *China – The Sonic Avant-garde*, a double-CD compilation that represents the first comprehensive collection of experimental music in China. The Sounding Beijing Festival (*Beijing shengna* 北京声纳), organised by the sound artist Yao Dajun 姚大钧 in late 2003, and the first edition of the 2pi Festival (*Di er ceng Pi yinyuejie* 第二层皮音乐节), organised in Hangzhou in the same year by the guitarist Li Jianhong 李剑鸿, are considered the first breakthrough events for Chinese experimental musicians (Karkowski and Yan 2007). Since the first years of the decade, more and more artists have chosen the path of experimentation and enriched the lexicon of experimental music in China with a varied array of sounds and innovations.



*The cover art of China – The Sonic Avant-garde compilation (copyright Post Concrete)*

To analyse the role of experimental music in contemporary Chinese society and culture, I employ the concept of ‘mediation through noise’. I define mediation as a practice of negotiation between two agents through a medial object or medium. Mediation operates through the medium to reconcile the extremes of material, historical, social, cultural or economical oppositions. In the case of experimental music in China, I identify ‘noise’ (*zaoyin* 噪音) as the medium around which the negotiating practices are structured (de Seta 2011: 3-4). The three chapters of my dissertation frame and explain, through the concept of mediation through noise, different aspects and peculiar features of experimental music in China. The first chapter focuses on the musicians’ use of audio noise and noisy aesthetics in defiance of the ideal of social harmony imposed by the state. The second chapter examines the ways in which musicians employ the ideal of a noisy amateurship against the mediation of conservatories, established education and mass media. The third chapter describes how experimental music pioneers a new kind of noisy

mediation between the live performance and the mediated dissemination, creating new communal spaces where production and consumption are deeply interwoven.<sup>2</sup>

In this short paper I present the core topic of the third chapter of my dissertation. I argue that, through its noisy mediations, experimental music in China blurs the differences between the idealised liveness of rock music and the mediated nature of contemporary cultural products. The point of this paper is to illustrate, through the specific case of experimental music in China, how contemporary cultural products transcend the polarising duality of liveness and mediation, and how the continuous mediation of live performance and enlivenment of media results in a new form of community. Tracing how the production, recording and consumption of experimental music are often deeply interwoven, I aim to emphasise the urgency of rethinking the concept of liveness in the communities developing around contemporary cultural products. This new kind of liveness does not emerge only in underground music scenes, but can appear in any kind of community or subculture that thrives on the online platforms of new media. As a matter of fact, the experimental music scene has developed in China during the same decade in which the Internet has suddenly become accessible to hundreds of millions of Chinese users.<sup>3</sup> In light of this, I am firmly convinced that understanding the potential of online communities and their relationship with cultural production and participation in China is an issue of paramount importance for cultural studies, media studies and social sciences alike.

This paper is organised into two sections dealing with two complementary and mirrored aspects of the same process. The first section describes the spaces in which experimental music is performed live and identifies the forms of their unavoidable mediation. The second part analyses the communal spaces resulting from the mediation, and follows the unavoidable enlivenment of the disseminated cultural products and online platforms.

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2 I use 'mediation', not to be confused with the more general 'mediation', as a specific term that describes the process through which live performance is reproduced and disseminated on the media (Auslander 2008:4).

3 According to the *26th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China* by CNNIC, the number of Internet users in China doubled between 2004 and 2007 (from 94 to 210 million), and doubled again between 2007 and 2010 (CNNIC 2010:12). According to the latest reports from 2012, there are around 513 million Internet users in China.

## PLACES OF EMERGENCE: THE LIVE MEDIATISED

*Xianchang* (现场), the Chinese term for ‘live’, is also used to refer to the scene of an accident or an incident; taken separately, the two characters describe a place (*chang* 场) of emergence (*xian* 现). Linguistically, liveness defines an ideal moment of presence or the scene of a noteworthy event. *Live in Nanjing* (*Nanjing Xianchang* 南京现场), released on CD by Li Jianhong’s 2pi Records in 2006, is a solid experimental record and a fairly popular release amongst the Chinese experimental audience. This CD contains the recording of an improvised live performance by Li Jianhong, Huang Jin 黄锦, Ji Mu 积木 and Li Tieqiao 李铁桥, and perfectly exemplifies the oxymoronic concept of ‘live recording’ (Auslander 2008: 60). The CD title stresses liveness and the specificity of the performance’s occurrence in time. The wild interaction between fuzzy guitar, improvised epileptic drumming, wordless screaming, electronics and alto sax shrieks is presented in four untitled compositions called “Live Recording” (*Xianchang Jilu* 现场记录) 1, 2, 3 and 4, song titles that contribute to underscore the unadulterated nature of the live improvisations. Moreover, the songs are framed as live events with the inclusion of the audio recording of the final moments of the show, during which sax player

Li Tieqiao presents the musicians to the cheering audience in the background. A live performance, ideally the most genuine and authentic form of music, becomes a CD, a mass-produced marketable object, and a fixed cultural product.

In China, too, audiences and critics alike often idealise live venues as the loci of genuine performance, spontaneous action and immediate feeling (Frith 1996: 207, Yan 2002: 117). Yet, this ideal liveness is purely fictitious, since live performances

are thoroughly mediatised even before they become a CD or an MP3 file.

As in other parts of the world, in the People’s Republic of China, live performances of experimental music take place in the spaces painstakingly



*The cover art of Live in Nanjing (copyright 2pi)*

opened up by rock music during the past twenty years: small indie music venues, live bars and bigger live houses, mainly situated in the outskirts of big cities and metropolises. In these places of emergence, the live performance reveals its mediatised nature (Auslander 2008: 24). I analyse the mediatisation of liveness from two symmetrical points of view: the live stage, with its apparatus of reproduction, and the audience, with its recording devices and its practices of dissemination.

#### THE SOUND OF MEDIATISATION

The apparatus of reproduction of the stage is perhaps the most evident aspect of mediatisation (Auslander 2008: 27). Microphones disconnect the sound from its immediate source and environment and project it into the venue through mixers, amplifiers and large speakers. Amplification is standard practice in most if not all of contemporary music (Frith 1996: 239). In popular music, the presence of amplification apparatus is often hidden to create intimacy with the artists. In rock music, the devices occasionally become instruments that fully participate in the performance through the enhancement of their limitations, such as distortions, hisses and feedbacks. Experimental music goes one step further by purposefully emphasising this aspect of mediatisation: amplifiers, mixers, microphones, cables and inappropriate sound sources are all co-opted as instruments themselves. For the audience, most of the appeal of experimental live shows lies in shifting the attention from the musician's physical gesture to his aural performativity (Stuart 2003: 63) and inspecting how the whole apparatus of reproduction and other media-related objects are thrown in the mix and rendered aurally unrecognisable.

In a series of live shows throughout 2010 Xu Cheng 徐称, playing with his Shanghai-based band Torturing Nurse, performed thirty-minute long plateaus of churning harsh noise using a single oscillator disassembled and rebuilt in the shape of a glove. In the glove, controls and switches were soldered as contact pins on each finger. Touching materials and parts of the stage with the dismembered effect box implanted on his hand produced disjointed and disorderly output signals then distorted through an overdriven guitar amplifier. This is just one salient example of the reconfiguration of the apparatus of reproduction characteristic of experimental music. An oscillator, usually employed as a filtering device or as a wave generator for synthesisers, becomes an instrument in itself. Moreover, its input system transcends the

human-machine relationship and involves the contact with stage parts as elements of the assemblage.

The silhouette of musicians hunched over cable-laden tables rummaging with electronic devices, a common sight at experimental concerts, proves how this kind of music is perfectly conscious of the inescapably mediatised nature of liveness and not interested in pursuing the ‘real’ live behind the amplification. Sometimes, as in many of the Beijing-based sound



*Xu Cheng's glove-oscillator (copyright Torturing Nurse)*

artist Yan Jun's 颜峻 recent (2009–2011) performances, it is the very core of a venue's amplification system – mixer, cables and speakers – that is used as the sound source, self-feeding its own amplifying function. At other times, the instrument is composed of the appliances through which the media are usually experienced: radio receivers, televisions, laptops, MP3 players, recorders and loudspeakers. Experimental musicians in China effectively play the stage, the apparatus of reproduction and media-related objects as instruments in their own right, performing the raw sound of mediatisation itself.



## THE RECORDING AUDIENCE

The listeners down stage are also part of the process of mediatisation. The audience amplifies the performance in various ways, forming a fundamental actor in the mediatised experience of liveness. This process usually begins on social network sites or instant messaging applications with the announcement of the concert, and shifts to other, smaller screens during the performance itself. The wavering luminous squares of digital cameras and smartphones inevitably pop up in front of each performer and preserve his actions in the aftermath. The documentation created by the audience eternalises the performance through the same channels through which the show was advertised. This happens visually, with pictures and videos, but also linguistically, in reviews and discussions, and more importantly, musically: audience members, show organisers and musicians alike often record live performances to upload them as digital releases or to print and disseminate them as CDs or tapes.

The live performance of experimental music in China is heavily mediatised, primarily through the apparatus of reproduction and the audience, to the point of becoming experimentation with the sound of mediatisation itself – the distorted noise of overdriven and self-feeding media. Performances are mediatised and become documents, samples, videos, pictures, audio streams and discussions: it is the consumption of this cultural



*Mediatisation devices: cellphones and cameras held by the audience at a noise show at Shanghai 696 Live Bar (696 Xianchang jiuba 696 现场酒吧) in 2007*

production that creates community. The next section follows the ways in which the mediatised production is enlivened in the places of emergence of the community.

### ONLINE SPACES: ENLIVENED MEDIA

The production of recordings is just one example of the mediatisation of live performance – many CDs, tapes and vinyl LPs exist as audio files disseminated on the Internet, and their digital form is often more popular, more shared and more listened than the physical version. In an age when music is stored and retrieved mainly in digital supports (Frith 1996: 227), the Internet has become “a logical new distribution medium” (Cascone 2002: 396). Still, the online spaces are not only the site of dissemination of recordings and documentation, but also platforms where these media are enlivened by their audiences. Just to name a few websites, Douban 豆瓣, Sina Weibo (*Xinlang Weibo* 新浪微博), Blogbus (*Boke daba* 博客大巴), Fanfou 饭否, MySpace, Youku 优酷, Tudou 土豆网, Vimeo and Taobao 淘宝网 all provide streaming, advertising, blogging, uploading and e-commerce services that experimental musicians in China regularly use, visiting them way more frequently than the actual spaces of live performance. Each musician’s activity is virtually mirrored in a Douban Station (*Douban xiaozhan* 豆瓣小站) or a Sina Weibo page where the artist presents music samples, pictures, videos, biographical information and upcoming shows to the online community.

### COMMUNAL PERFORMANCES

Records are not passively consumed but enlivened by the community that develops around them. Popular music, even when it is “unpopular popular” as experimental music, is mainly driven by communal use value (Frith 1996: 12-3, 20) and a community, the social environment in which music is given meaning and value, develops in the flow of continuous exchange between live performances and mediatised documentation. Audience discussions during live shows, sharing records, recommending downloads and commenting reviews all generate community. Similarly, producing an album is a way of participating in the community of musicians, experts and listeners through their opinions and reactions.



Taking Douban as an example:<sup>4</sup> live performances can virtually be attended in advance, offering the options to select 'I want to attend' (*Wo yao canjia* 我要参加) and 'I'm interested in' (*Wo gan xingqu* 我感兴趣) the event.

The screenshot shows the Douban website interface. At the top, there are navigation links: 豆瓣社区, 豆瓣读书, 豆瓣电影, 豆瓣音乐, 豆瓣同城 (highlighted), 九点, and 豆瓣FM. Below this is a header for '豆瓣同城 上海' with sub-links for '活动', '团购', and '我的同城'. The main title of the event is '上海话剧艺术中心·2011年春季新剧本朗读会'. To the left is a poster for the event. To the right, the event details are listed: '开始时间: 2011年5月6日 周五 15:00', '结束时间: 2011年5月22日 周日 21:00', '地点: 上海 徐汇区 上海话剧艺术中心 (安福路288号)', '发起人: 上海话剧艺术中心', '组织者: 西瓜徐', '类型: 音乐/演出', and '53人感兴趣 16人参加'. On the far right, there are two red buttons: '我感兴趣' and '我要参加'. At the bottom right, there is a '3人推荐' (3 recommendations) and a '推荐' (Recommend) button.

Event page on Douban, with the 'I am interested/I want to attend' buttons on the right side

Similarly, records and other documents are digitalised and become nodes in a constellation of communal performances. The mediated live performance completes its journey from the actual spaces to the online spaces where a new kind of liveness accrues around the documents of performance. For example, once published as a CD, *Live in Nanjing* becomes a relatively fixed cultural entity circulating in different digital forms. Moreover, the record is registered in databases, linked to other releases by similar musicians, disseminated through microblogs and included into virtual libraries.

With this dispersion and refraction, the record effectively creates a community. A Douban user clicking on the 'I want to listen' (*xiang ting* 想听) button on the *Live in Nanjing* album page instantly obtains the CD showing

4 Launched in March 2005, Douban (豆瓣 bean segment) is one of the major Internet communities in China, serving as a book, movie and music review database, social network and discussion board (Ho 2007). Users can rate movies, books and records on a five-star scale, and the mean of their ratings determines a decimal score visible to everyone.

豆瓣音乐

音乐人
排行榜
分类浏览
我的音乐
豆瓣FM

## Fish



SHOJI HANO  
DEREK BAILEY

FISH

表演者: [Shoji Hano / Derek Bailey](#)

版本特性: Import

介质: Audio CD

发行时间: 2001

出版者: P.S.F/PSFD-8009

唱片数: 1

★★★★☆ 7.7

(24人评价)

★★★★★	4.2%
★★★★☆	75.0%
★★★★☆	20.8%
★★★☆☆	0.0%
★★☆☆☆	0.0%

更新描述或封面

想听
在听
听过
评价: ★★★★★ 力荐

写乐评
+ 加入豆列
分享到

推荐

Record page on Douban with the five-star rating system

up listed in his virtual library of records, together with related resources as reviews and download links. Having obtained the record, the same user is invited – through the paired ‘I’m listening’ (*zai ting* 在听) and ‘I’ve listened’ (*tingguo* 听过) buttons – to rate the album on a five-star basis. Once rated, the virtual CD is enshrined in the library of the user profile, paired with his vote and his opinions, directly linked to the musician’s homepage containing pictures and videos. At the same time, the listener becomes included in a list of other users that listened and rated the same record. Each of these passages built around the simulacrum of a record is broadcasted live to the whole user’s friend list, in the form “[Username] is listening to *Live in Nanjing* ([number] stars)”, launching back the whole process into a livefeed-based communal activity of listening and judgment sharing that Auslander, following Couldry, calls ‘online liveness’ and ‘group liveness’ (Auslander 2008: 61).

#### DO-IT-YOURSELF MEDIATISATION

Frith (1996: 61) comments that “the problem for the record industry is that its best means of communication with its consumers are mediated: sounds reach us through radio, film, and television; stars reach us through newspapers,



*The livefeed of an anonymous Douban user listening and rating Live in Nanjing*

magazines, and video”. Given that the record industry obviously deals with commodified information, what Frith laments is not the mediated nature of the communication between industry and customers, but the top-down nature of promotion and evaluation. The case of experimental music in China proves how, even in a burgeoning capitalist economy, the Internet enables the development of an underground record industry that leaves much of the mediation process to the audience and the musicians themselves.

Many musicians, even when relatively satisfied about their popularity and working conditions, identify the Internet as the most important source of information and as a platform for further dissemination of their creations. “I download much of the music I listen to, mostly using Souseek or FTP servers” (Junky, interview, 2009); “You can go on online stores such as Forced Exposure or Boomkat, but sometimes shipped packages ‘get lost’ at the customs, or are charged with unpredictable custom fees. So I mostly rely on download” (Yan Jun, interview, 2009). Talking about the scope of the market of Chinese experimental music, Wu Quan explains: “Of course we are interested in expanding internationally, but this needs time and dialogue, and people that organise it. I’m not good at foreign languages, I can only speak Chinese”. Answering to the same question, also Yan Jun recognises that “the main problem is the language barrier, but now young people are better and better at English” (interviews, 2009). At a national level, the Chinese experimental community thrives online and successfully transposes do-it-yourself tactics into online spaces. Yan and Wu voice a common opinion in the community, saying that the new “born digital” generations of post-80s and post-90s youth will overcome language barriers and integrate with the transnational community of experimental music.

## CONCLUSION

After almost ten years since *China – The Sonic Avant-garde*, experimental music proliferates and achieves international recognition, thriving at the fringes of the Chinese underground music scene. It continues to experiment on boundaries, meaning systems and mediation, keeping its critical edge sharp, noisy, challenging and sometimes disturbing. As shown in this short article, experimental music in China also experiments with liveness, mediatisation and community. The performance of experimental music in China pursues a kind of liveness thoroughly mediated through the noise of the apparatus of reproduction and the recording devices of the audience. The mediatisation is then enlivened in online communities as small-scale intimate live performances become documentation on the potentially boundless online spaces. Through the online platforms of dissemination and communication, the new generations of experimental musicians come in contact with the transnational community and reach an international audience. Experimental music in China effectively transcends the polarising duality of liveness and mediatisation, and employs noise and do-it-yourself dissemination strategies to mediate between the underground intimacy and the online interconnectedness, shaping a new idea of communal performance and a new form of liveness.

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## INTERVIEWS

1. Junky, male, Shanghai-based. Noise musician, former member of Junkyard, plays in Torturing Nurse and as Ultracocker Shocking. Chinese spoken August 2007, Chinese written April 2009, Chinese spoken in October 2009, more meetings in 2010.
2. Wu Quan, male, Beijing-based. Multimedia artist, released on Kwanyin Records, collaborated with FM3, Yan Jun and Wang Fan. Chinese written, February 2009.
3. Yan Jun, male, Beijing-based. Sound artist, writer, organiser. Chinese written, March 2009; Chinese spoken, June 2010.

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