Making and Unmaking Freedom: Sound, Affect and Beijing

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ABSTRACT

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Making and Unmaking Freedom: Sound, Affect and Beijing

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In this dissertation, I investigate the practice of sound art in the post-Tiananmen era in China. I define sound art as creative practices that use sound (including silence) as a major means of creation and expression. It is a genre that both connects and disturbs categories of visual arts and music. The driving question of this project is how the sign of freedom translated into a socio-cultural ideology, a value, and an impulse shapes and is shaped by a socio-cultural milieu that is itself changing under the influence of globalization. In other words, the project examines how freedom affects the social and the personal. At the same time, the project “unmakes” the sign to investigate the affect of freedom—the thing that slips away in the process of signification. Drawing from sound art practice, the project suggests that to be free is to be sensitive and open in everyday life, to sense beyond security, to place one’s self in crisis, and to become the body without organs (BwO).

China’s sound art provides one of the best sites to examine how freedom (with its referents of neoliberalism, consumerism, and human rights, as well as 自在 [spontaneous becoming or self-existing]) is used, interpreted, felt, expressed and lived. In China’s sound art culture, there are activists who consider sound art a social tool to fight for democracy and social justice, avant-garde artists who criticize consumerism and capitalism in Chinese society, as well as musicians and artists who advocate anarchism.
and alternative lifestyles. There are also artists who are less interested in making claims about political or social issues, but are more concerned with the practice of self through making good sound art works. The project argues that different kinds of freedom-searching acts have different political and social significances; even making good experimental artwork is a kind of social intervention by resisting existing political or social ideologies.

In the dissertation, I discuss two spatial references of freedom in Beijing, Tiananmen Square and 798 Art District in chapter one. In chapter two, I outline the field of sound art culture in China during the post-Tiananmen era. Then, in chapter three, I analyze two collective affects, anxiety and powerlessness, related to a series of freedom-searching events in the sound art culture. In chapter four, I depict and analyze the characteristics of a utopian collective that practices experimental and free improvisational music in suburban Beijing. I further examine in chapter five how Beijing-based sound art scene connects to music subcultures in other cities, while reflecting on disconnections between sound art and China’s contemporary arts. Finally, in the conclusion, I propose how sound art practice might cultivate affective listening.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Marina L. Peterson

Assistant Professor of Interdisciplinary Arts
For my parents

Wang Dengmin and Zhang Yuzhen
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PREFACE

In the beginning, I planned to research jazz music in China. What I had in mind was jazz improvisation, Chinese jazz musicians, and, maybe jazz culture.

So, on June 2008, I flew to Shanghai, known as the home of jazz in China.

One night in the Cotton Club, Shanghai’s well-known jazz bar, I watched vocalist Zhao Ke, a.k.a. Coco, perform with his band The Possicobilities. The club was full of people; most were foreigners. I enjoyed the musical performances and had a chance to briefly chat with Coco. He was very friendly and I was amazed at how he conversed with his foreign audience in fluent English. However, throughout the night, I did not get the feeling that this was something I could stay for. Nor did I sense or find myself amongst the audience in such a club space. Besides, I could not afford going to places like the Cotton Club every day for my research. Without knowing what my research subject was going to be, I decided that jazz in Shanghai was not right at that moment.

Music is a way of expressing, connecting and living. This was what I believed in and what drove me to research music. The question was how to come into contact with music in a context in which I could be situated and triggered as a listener, an ethnographer, and a creator.

I departed Shanghai and flew to Beijing.

I felt I left one world for another.

In July 2008, somewhere close to a business section in downtown Beijing, I purchased a book called *Beijing Ren Shou Ce* [Handbook of Beijingers], known for
having details of the city an old Beijinger would not even know. I circled music bars, clubs, art schools and art districts.

Beijing seized me with its sensual stimulants that balanced my frustration of finding nothing during the first week that seemed right as a research subject. Tiananmen Square, the Drum and Bell Tower district, Panjiayuan flee market, Beijing accent, taxi drivers, fried wheat pancakes, rolling donkey, punk bands, and folk singers.

On my third trip to 798 Art District, I thought of going in the morning to avoid the crowds in the afternoon. In the morning 798 was quiet. Many galleries were still closed. Behind the empty seats and tables outside of a coffee shop, on the corner, I saw a tiny studio several steps up from the sidewalk. Next to its unpolished wooden door was a small chalkboard that read “Sugar Jar.”

I stepped in, drawn to the sound of an ambient soundtrack.

At the other end of the long narrow space a young man was working on a computer, with an old piano behind his back, two electric guitars leaning on the piano, and two old big speakers facing the wooden door. A plastic fan swirled up a small realm of wind in the middle of the room. He looked up, nodded at me, and turned back to the screen. The soundtrack changed. On my left was a wall covered with CDs.

With excitement, I browsed through Noise is Free Minimidi 2008, Sound, Buddha Machine, Favorite Beijing Sound, Bird, Feng Hao Sound, Wang Fan Five Primary Elements. Then I heard the young man asked “are you with him?” “No,” I said, as I turned around to face a European looking man with a camera on one of his shoulders. “Do you speak English?” he asked with a heavy accent, looking at both of us. “Very
“little,” the young man replied. I offered to help translate for them. The man with the camera’s name was Bruno Moynié; he was a French filmmaker based in Toronto. He had come to make a documentary on the avant-garde music scene in Beijing. His friend, a diplomat in the Canadian embassy in Beijing, introduced him to several figures in the music scene. The first person he had been referred to was the owner of Sugar Jar, Lao Yang. After the self-introduction, he asked where he could find an assistant who could assist him in filming, interviewing and translating.

Well, perfect.

I introduced myself and offered to work with him as his assistant on the condition that I would continue transcribing and translating the interviews for his documentary after the shooting, and he would share the videos with me for my research. This encounter excited both of us. Soon, a skinny and spirited middle-aged man showed up. He was Lao Yang. Our collaboration started. There I was, in what I later would describe as the field of China’s sound art.

From the interview with Lao Yang, I heard about underground and independent music culture in Beijing, and China’s experimental music and sound art. Following Lao Yang, we interviewed musicians, artists, venue owners, and music critics in Beijing through Bruno’s connection. A few days later, when we were shooting a sound art show held in Sugar Jar, I met the Taiwanese sound artist Lin Chi-Wei who made a curious comment that there was no sound art in China.

I sensed that there was something around and beyond me. Something vigorous yet ambiguous or even controversial. I was animated. And, I wanted to stay longer.
INTRODUCTION

Noise is Free.

“Mini Midi Experimental Music Festival 2008”

When the continuity of affective escape is put into words, it tends to take on positive connotations. For it is nothing less than the perception of one’s own vitality, one’s sense of aliveness, of changeability (often signified as “freedom”).

Brian Massumi “Parables for the Virtual”

If there were not something like “freedom,” we would not speak of it. For even when it is deprived of a referent or empty of all assignable signification, this word still carries, even to the point of indecision or rather in the impasse of its meaning, the very meaning of logos in which philosophy recognized itself: the opening of a free space of meaning. Thus philosophy has always already given itself over to the thinking of what it can neither master nor examine: and this is also what we understand, simply, by “being-free.”

Jean Luc Nancy “The Experience of Freedom”

This dissertation explores Making and Unmaking Freedom in Beijing, through a study of sound art. It is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Beijing with an emerging sound art culture that includes artists, musicians, graphic designers, fans, and social activists. I define sound art as creative practices that use sound (including silence) as a major means of creation and expression. It is a genre that both connects and disrupts categories of visual arts and music. In this project, the term sound art includes experimental music, noise improvisation, sound installation, and sound performance. In the following, I first introduce the conceptual structure of the project. Then I outline the ethnographic field. Finally, I offer a synopsis of individual chapters.
The Conceptual Field

When we talk about freedom, we are already talking about something else; in the process of translation, something slips away. What gets expressed or signified is something else that evokes different meanings and productivities. *Making and Unmaking Freedom* pays attention to both—the expressed or the signified and the intensities vividly or vaguely felt that often slip away in translation.

Freedom’s productivity is explored through the question of what freedom does (including both its referents and its significations). In the contemporary world, for example, freedom often refers to the free market of neoliberalism, freedom of speech in human rights, freedom to choose in consumerism, and freedom of living alternative ways of life. When further contextualized in post-Tiananmen China, freedom is associated with the June 4th Tiananamen students’ protest for political democracy, Deng Xiaoping’s reform-and-open-up policy, freedom of artistic expression in contemporary art, human rights, Internet censorship, freedom of religion, and grassroots art practices free from official, academic and commercial standards.

While confirming the critical value of the referents and significations of freedom, this project “unmakes” the sign of freedom, investigating the affect of freedom—the thing that slips away in the process of signification. The affect of freedom refers to the personal, the bodily and even the existential aspects that sometimes accompany the practice of the sign of freedom. Here I am in debt to Deleuze and Guattari, and Brian Massumi. They share a naturalist (or materialist) ontology that, to put it in a very general way, conceives of nature and the world as fluid and heterogeneous (Cox 2003; Deleuze...
and Guattari 1987; Massumi 2002). This Deleuzian ontology makes it possible to think and talk about the extra-symbolic realm of experience without subscribing to a plane of transcendence. Instead, a naturalist or materialist ontology commits to “the plane of immanence,”¹ which is one of the basic Deleuzian concepts central to this project. The plane of immanence is distinct from a Platonist or Kantian “plane of transcendence” which directs and organizes life and which refers to something beyond experience. Instead, the plane of immanence refers to a domain where there are only intensities, forces and flows and from which forms, structures, organizations, and significations are drawn (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). When one breaks away from habitual or structural confinements, one returns to “the plane of immanence” and perceives one’s own vitality and changeability (Deleuze 2006; Massumi 2002). Brian Massumi calls this process “affective escape.” He further suggests that it is often our felt intensity and changeability of the affective escape that is signified as freedom (2002: 36).

¹ “The plane of immanence” is a key concept in Deleuze’s ontology of becoming. In A Thousand Plateaus, Deleuze and Guattari describe the plane of immanence: “Here, there are no longer any forms or developments of forms; nor are there subjects or the formation of subjects. There is no structure, any more than there is genesis. There are only relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness between unformed elements, or at least between elements that are relatively unformed, molecules and particles of all kinds. There are only haecceities, affects, subjectless individuations that constitute collective assemblages” (266).

According to Deleuze, the plane of immanence is life. He tells a story regarding this perspective. “What is immanence? A life…No one has described what a life is better than Charles Dickens, if we take the indefinite article as an index of the transcendental. A disreputable man, a rogue, held in contempt by everyone, is found as he lies dying. Suddenly, those taking care of him manifest an eagerness, respect, even love, for his slightest sign of life. Everybody bustles about to save him, to the point where, in his deepest coma, this wicked man himself senses something soft and sweet penetrating him. But to the degree that he comes back to life, his saviors turn colder, and he becomes once again mean and crude. Between his life and death, there is a moment that is only that of a life playing with death. The life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life that releases a pure event freed from the accidents of internal and external life, that is, from the subjectivity and objectivity of what happens: a ‘Homo tantum’ with whom everyone empathizes and who attains a sort of beatitude. It is a haecceity no longer of individuation but of singularization: a life of pure immanence, neutral, beyond good and evil, for it way only the subject that incarnated it in the midst of things that made it good or bad. The life of such individuality fades away in favor of the singular life immanent to a man who no longer has a name, though he can be mistaken for no other. A singular essence, a life…” (Deleuze 2001, 29).
These formulations clarify a confusion I had during fieldwork research regarding the difference between two Chinese terms, 自由 and 自在. The first term 自由, which is the direct Chinese translation of freedom, initially did not exist in the Chinese language but was introduced in the early twentieth century. Before that, the closest term to freedom was 自在, which appears in classical Chinese texts (e.g. Taoist and Buddhist teachings). The difference between the connotations and cultural associations tied to 自由 [freedom] and 自在 [spontaneous, or self existing] became salient during my fieldwork.

自由 [Freedom] has a relatively stronger Western connotation, related to the idea of democracy. 自在 [spontaneous, or self existing] is more associated with the image of a Taoist who wanders across worlds— “[flying] like Kun-Peng thousands of miles up in the air… carefree like little birds easing down to the field,” “being perfectly one with heaven and earth,” and “being heaven and earth” (Shang 131). These two images of Kun and Peng come from a story told by one of the earliest Taoist thinkers Zhuangzi in 逍遊 [Wondering Beyond]:

In the northern darkness there is a fish and his name is Kun. The Kun is so huge I don't know how many thousand miles he measures. He changes and becomes a bird whose name is Peng. The back of the Peng measures I
don't know how many thousand miles across and, when he rises up and flies off, his wings are like clouds all over the sky.²

The word 逍遥 in the title 逍遥游 is usually understood as free and spontaneous. But more significant to me is 游, which is when the fish Kun changes into the bird Peng.

Zhuangzi seems to suggest that one has to go beyond one’s own immediate and familiar environment in order to cross boundaries and make natural transformations. This story illustrates a key concept in Zhuangzi’s philosophy—“transmutability.” One has to cultivate one’s ability to transmute in order to be free, to be 逍遥 [wondering beyond].

Similarly, Jean-Luc Nancy relates the idea of transformation to freedom. As Nancy explained, “Freedom is the power that exposes me to myself as transgressing 'my' self, a going out… this 'surprising' freedom is not libertarian freedom, which presupposes a free subject before any acting. One could say: to be free is first of all to be free of the self” (Hutchens 164). Both Zhuangzi and Nancy describe transformation as freedom, while Nietzsche, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that art realizes or can realize such a transformation.

For Nietzsche, the spirit of shifting perspectives and transvaluation is what characterizes a free artist, who fears petrifaction and strives to break all even-measuredness of time and force. Deleuze and Guattari write that creating art is “always a question of freeing life wherever it is imprisoned, or of tempting it into an uncertain combat” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 171). Following these definitions, freedom is no longer a state of being or an ideological or spiritual pursuit, but an ability to transform

² Original Chinese text: 北冥有魚，其名為鯤。鯤之大，不知其幾千里也。化而為鳥，其名為鵬。鵬之背，不知其幾千里也。怒而飛，其翼若垂天之雲。I use the English translation by Burton Watson.
and transmute. It is a moment of transformation, after which one no longer goes back to what one changes from (Deleuze 2001).

In addition, it is also worth pointing out the importance of space in Zhuangzi’s story. Space is where self exists and transforms and is important to the state of 免。 The sky is the milieu where the fish Kun transmutes to the bird Peng, leaving the sea. Therefore, space is not only a location that contains the change. Rather, it plays a part in generating the metamorphosis that is to occur. Furthermore, space is not only generative, but at the same time it is selective of millions of potentialities the fish Kun could transform into. The space (i.e. sky and sea) in Zhuangzi’s story corresponds to what Deleuze conceived as “the plane of immanence.”

As Massumi points out, the milieu where transformation occurs is “the field of emergence” (Massumi 2002). In the field of emergence, “the rabbit might turn into a dove and fly away” (Massumi 2002: 191). While the fish is transforming into the bird, there are only sets of relations between the fish, the sea, the bird, and the sky. In the field of emergence or the plane of immanence, according to Deleuze and Guattari, “There is no line separating earth and sky; there is no intermediate distance, no perspective or contour; visibility is limited; and yet there is an extraordinarily fine topology that relies not on points or objects but rather on haecceities, on sets of relations” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 383). The milieu of all milieus is chaos (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). The milieu of human life is where ideas, ideals and practices begin and arrive.

Drawing from these conceptions, I argue that freedom is situated in the mundane, and the everyday, instead of somewhere above, before or beyond. It confronts the life of
now. How to be free is a question of how to live. “Freedom as transformation” contains a great degree of unpredictability, similar to experimental music. What one transforms to is undetermined, a surprise. This argument is made not solely based on philosophical texts, but is derived from empirical research with Chinese sound artists and experimental musicians. My theorization is informed of making sense of artists’ discourses and practices, especially those who are disillusioned with freedom as advocated by Western democracy or neoliberalism, and who stress individual cultivation or the practice of self.

To summarize the role of freedom in this project, Making and Unmaking Freedom examines both 自由 [freedom] and 自在 [spontaneous, or self existing]. The project addresses the socio-linguistic formulation of freedom as a cultural value or a political ideology. It also focuses on the affect (discussed more below) of freedom, that is the perception of one’s aliveness and changeability, using Massumi’s vocabulary, or a Taoist state where one feels one’s existence and spontaneous becoming, using Zhuangzi’s expression. Making and Unmaking Freedom is a process of returning ideologies, ideals and spiritualities to the ordinary. I propose that, to be free, one does not need to climb ladders, or take on heroic endeavors, or seclude oneself away from society, but to be sensitive and open in everyday life, and to enhance one’s capacity to transform. Ultimately, it is an ordinary metamorphosis, nothing grand or heroic, but intense. It is a name for ecstasies, and, as Nancy suggests, is like being in love (Nancy 1993). The value of “freedom as transformation” lies in the process, not its end. The end of transformation, instead, only suggests another impasse, which may or may not lead to another transformation (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).
Discussions above already show the crucial role affect plays in this project, in how referents of freedom affect the sensuous life in China’s sound art culture and how to unmake these referents to return to the feeling vitality of becoming free, i.e., the affect of freedom. In the following section, I will focus on how I interpret and use the concept of affect.

Lawrence Grossberg distinguishes two spaces of affect (Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 309). The first space corresponds to affectio (the ontological/Deleuzian space of affect), the second affectus (the empirical space of affect) (Grossberg 2010: 327). Although Grossberg worries about the mixing of the two and clarifies that he is only interested in affectus, I believe affectio and affectus are not easily separable. Following Massumi, I am interested in how affect is the simultaneous participation of the virtual in the actual and the actual in the virtual (2002).

Affect connects the ontological to the empirical, two different but not completely separate domains. The ontological space of affect is about the intensities one feels during one’s becoming under certain social, cultural, or artistic mediations (e.g. becoming-hero, becoming-activist, becoming-sacrifice, and becoming-artist, and etc. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). As O’Sullivan writes, affect is “the matter in us responding and resonating with the matter around” (2001). Affect connects the personal and the private to the social and the public. It is, as Claire Colebrook suggests, defining Deleuze’s conception of affect, “what happens to us when we feel an event…[A]ffect is not the meaning of an experience but the response it prompts” (Colebrook 2002: xix). This
definition of affect points out two aspects of affect important to this project: the
relationality of affect, and its ability to go beyond signification and representation.

Affect constitutes what relates one to a place, an event, a person, a group, and an
object, a relation that may or may not be articulated, evaluated or signified. Affect does
away with causes and effects, subjects and objects, the distinctions between them which
no longer make intrinsic sense. Such relationality prompts one to act, which is often
explained as spontaneous or instinctual. Theorists offer definitions of affect addressing
either one or both of these two aspects. For example, Erin Manning defines the
relationality of affect as “the with-ness of the movement of the world” (Manning 2007:
xxi). Steve Goodman describes affect in Sonic Warfare as “the ontological glue of the
universe” (195). Addressing the second aspect of affect, O’Sullivan describes it as “the
stuff that goes beneath, beyond, and even parallel to signification” (128). Guattari offers
a more complicated version when suggesting affect’s relation to meaning and
signification: affect is “installed ‘before’ the circumscription of identities, and manifested
by unlocatable transference, unlocatable with regard to their origin as well as with regard
to their destination” (Guattari 1996:158).

Affect also subjects us to political and economic manipulation because of these
two aspects. The manipulation of people through affect is difficult to combat because
affect is the extra-linguistic and extra-signifying aspects of connections. Theorists have
warned us that in the contemporary world affect has become increasingly pervasive
(Grossberg 2010; Jameson 1991; Massumi 2002; O’Sullivan 2001). Affect, or in Fredric
Jameson’s words, “a surfeit of it,” characterizes our conditions, from political to social,
cultural, and commercial (Jameson 1991). A global city overflows with affects. And oftentimes, affect does not act alone. It often functions along with identities, significations, and representations, the activities of which are also mobilized by affect in a subtle way. As I suggest in chapter one, although Beijing is not as capitalized and commercialized as the global cities of Tokyo, New York, or London, its imagined and simulative “New York-ness” or “Toyko-ness” brings and generates similar affective impacts no less stimulating and overwhelming.

Therefore, from the perspective of affect, this project is less interested in addressing whether there is freedom in China, but what events concerning different modalities of freedom do to us and how to negotiate with political and economical manipulations of one’s life in order to feel our own vitality. Answers are sought through sound art culture that is based in Beijing and has connections to other Chinese cities. The project asks: What happens to us when we feel the event of “Tiananmen Square Incident” discussed in a daily conversation or depicted in artwork? What happens to us when we feel a fashion art show or a Happening event in the commercialized 798 Art District? What happens to us when we feel a noise improvisation show in a place surrounded by ethnic objects, Buddhist symbols, effects units, synthesizers and wires? What happens to us when we feel a non-cooperative tension among artists in a cross-disciplinary art festival? And, what does it feel like to be in cities where these events occur?

Through the conceptual tool of affect, as well as a Deleuzian ontology that commits to becoming rather than being, the plane of immanence rather than the plane of transcendence, this project conceives sound as consisting of the capacity to affect and be
affected. Small or even inaudible sound affects a listener viscerally just as a thread of spider web sticks to a naked hand. Both are difficult for eyes to see, but are concretely felt on the skin. Sound touches, disturbs, caresses, disorients, situates, unifies and dissolves. In other words, sound affects, but sound also can be affected. A small molehill of earth changes the vibration of sounds. The change of temperature and humidity in the air, the clothes we wear, the size of the space, and the number of people listening affects the intensity and density of sounds sometimes beyond the ear’s detection. On an abstract but no less practical level, our cultural, social, economic and intellectual states also affect how sound is made, heard, and used.

On the plane of immanence, sound generates intensities that may make us feel our own vitality and changeability, or 自在 to put it in Chinese. It often occurs when a listening event forces one to go beyond one’s habitual ways of sensual perceptions, beyond listening as signifying or interpreting. Free improvisation or certain sound art installation commits to rendering such a listening experience. However, this project also recognizes that sound is not immune from being signified; in fact listening is too often reduced to interpreting. Therefore, sound relates to referents of freedom when it is organized according to particular musical principles and techniques. Sound-as-culture could be used as a tool (in political propaganda, revolution, creative practices, or maintaining a lifestyle) for purposes that may have little to do with listening. The sound art culture in this project is by no means a homogenized cultural entity with a clear consensus on what sound art is, or a central spirit as early Chinese rock music claimed. Instead, China’s sound art culture encompasses a range of practices in pursuit of freedom,
through democracy, human rights, and alternative lifestyles, as well as a spontaneous way of living in a society that is constantly changing.

**The Ethnographic Field**

“The field,” as this project engages with it, is already situated in a world system. Following Gupta and Ferguson’s reconception of “the field” as a decentered notion rather than a locality that is clearly separated from “home,” I discuss the ethnographic field of this project as the “interlocking of multiple social-political sites and locations” (1997, 37). I depict the field of sound art in China as a porous organism that is contingent on its own making and unmaking and that passes affective forces into and across each other. Moreover, the project recognizes events, individuals, collectives, and spaces as containing multiple dimensions. Therefore, I discuss similar events and people more than once, drawing on different aspects of them, in order to examine a range of modalities, significations, and productivities of freedom. In what follows, I discuss the beginning of the fieldwork research, the socio-political contexts of sound art practice, as well as inspirational issues that have shaped the focus of this project.

I was introduced to the sound art culture in Beijing through a serendipitous collaboration with Bruno Moynié, a French filmmaker based in Toronto, whom I ended up assisting in making a documentary on Beijing’s avant-garde music culture. Together, we conducted interviews with artists, musicians, music distributors, and venue owners. It was right before the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, and the city was getting ready for a large flow of foreign visitors and media. Taxi drivers practiced their greetings in multiple languages. Many music venues conducted renovations after their owners had

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3 I describe more of this collaboration in Chapter 2.
failed to obtain official permits for business during the Games. In 798 Art District, I attended a sound art show performance by Beijing-based laptop musician Vavabond and the touring group Thee, Stranded Horse from France, in a venue known as Sugar Jar. There I met a few sound artists, curators and critics in the crowd. Although I left Beijing somewhat frustrated by the Taiwanese sound artist Lin Chi-Wei’s comment, “there is no sound art in China,” my initial encounter with the field piqued my curiosity, making me want to further explore this artistic phenomenon in the global city of Beijing.

In July 2009, I spent 15 days in Beijing meeting sound artists, establishing networks and updating my knowledge of the field. I attended a WaterLand Kwanyin sound event and had informal talks with a few sound artists about their work and life in Beijing. I was then able to meet Yan Jun, who had been out of the country for a sound art festival when I visited Beijing in 2008. Yan Jun is the organizer of WaterLand Kwanyin, and a writer with several published books related to Chinese underground rock music culture. He is one of the primary forces behind the formation of the sound art scene in China, particularly in Beijing. After a few conversations with him, I sensed his mixed feelings about the sound art scene in Beijing: While he had confidence in the energy and creativity of the artists, he was also worried about the survival and maintenance of the independent creative spirit when faced with the dual pressures of state censorship and the ever-expanding commoditization of the Chinese art world by global capitalism. The complexity in China’s sound art culture’s connection to the global sound networks and various social issues confirmed the value of this project for me. The comment “there has
been no sound art in China,” which had haunted me for over a year, began to be my inspiration.

Fig. 1. Poster of Mini Midi 2008, outside of 2 Kolegas Bar, courtesy of Yan Jun

I began exploring events related to sound art in China when I came back from the initial field trip in 2008. While researching online, a picture of the Mini Midi 2008 Experimental Music Festival caught my attention, particularly its theme Noise is Free (see fig. 1). Mini Midi is an annual festival organized by Sub Jam (founded by Yan Jun and others). The 2008 Mini Midi occurred only three months before my visit. The
existence of this festival raised some questions for me: does this festival suggest a sonic avant-garde movement in China by art activists? Is this a commercialized music carnival that is only about acting cool? Or is it a kind of protest against either the government or the music industry? With these questions in the back of my mind, I interviewed Yan Jun in 2009 during my second fieldtrip. I asked him “Why use the word ‘free’ to name a noise and experimental music festival?” “Why is noise free?” He replied,

Free, at that time [in the year 2008], suggested a double meaning for me. First, it meant free of charge, and it was an attitude. I emphasize the attitude more: I believe that free stuff is more important. For example, the sunset is free, but you do not want to look at it. You do not want to look at things that are free. You think things that are free are of no value. I still support this attitude today.

Another meaning suggested by the word free has something to do with my anger at that time, anger and depression. It [making noise] was liberation from depression. Noise is free, and noise is a means of revolution, a tool to attack. But now I no longer hold this attitude. I am not against anything, and I have moved beyond this position. That was what I was yesterday. Today I would not use this meaning of free. In other words, I do not need its dramatic effects.4

Although Yan Jun’s concern has moved beyond the idea of free, I find this change in values, the rapidity with which it has taken place, and its interactions with sound practices to be very interesting. What kind of social, political, and economic transformation affords the transmutation of a general interest in the idea of “free?”

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After the June 4th, 1989 Tiananmen Incident, the word “freedom” has become both problematic and a cliché. The word evokes the massacre of students on the night of June 4th and was used intensively in songs, poems, reports, and essays during the few months of protests. At the same time, Deng Xiaoping’s “reform and open-up policy” has complicated the dynamics of “freedom” in both concrete practice and abstract conceptualizations. The free market has broken the dichotomy between the oppressive state and freedom-searching artists. As Kraus points out, the issue of “freedom” is not simply a matter of one repressing and the other rebelling (Kraus 2004). The rapid economic changes in China, especially in big cities, have made art a source of entertainment and a commodity, accessible to all. Moreover, after the June 4th incident, the state also withdrew from cultural censorship to a certain degree (Kraus 2004: ix). Official censorship even became a desired “coolness” for rebellious artists (de Kloet 2010). These aspects of the idea or ideal of freedom support the formation of the conceptual drive of the project.

Beijing is the base of China’s sound art culture, where one meets the majority of native artists and musicians practicing sound art in China, foreign sound artists and musicians, sound art audiences, as well as venues suitable for sound art performances and installations. As the capital city of China, Beijing is the symbol of the state’s power, as well as being the cradle of the cultural and artistic avant-garde. Beijing provides an interactive space, like other global cities, where global subjects encounter, including the transnational capitalist class and alienated artists (Lefebvre 1996; Marcuse 2009). The city space is not only where the artists live, but more importantly, it is an instrument for
those artists to create space for a different kind of life. Although I only discuss Beijing as the main subject matter in the first chapter, in other chapters Beijing plays a crucial role without which the dynamics of the social activists’ acts, artists’ performances and subcultural collective lifestyle will not be the same. Though chapter five, “Touring out of Beijing,” discusses issues Beijing-based sound artists encounter in other cities, these experiences further show the special role Beijing plays in China’s sound art culture.

**Synopsis of Chapters**

In the formation and development of sound art culture in China, Beijing plays an elementary and decisive role. In the first chapter titled “Sounding Beijing,” I identify two major spatial references of freedom—Tiananmen Square and 798 Art District. Drawing on fieldwork research and archival materials I discuss how these two spaces affect what it feels like to be in the global city of Beijing, one of the economic bases of global capitalism and China’s cultural and artistic center. Spaces with affective power possess their own sensuous motifs and rhythms, and they are essentially fluid and open. Drawing from Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of territory, I distinguish the difference between geographical places and spaces of affective power. Such spaces possess their own sensuous motifs and rhythms. Essentially fluid, they affect and are affected by outside forces. I call spaces with affective power “affective territories.” The notion of “Affective territory” provides a lens to examine how space shapes everyday sensual life and how events give rise to territories that multiply or interrupt existing officially regulated spatial systems. Beijing, with multiple affective territories, is constitutive in the formation and development of China’s sound art culture. It attracts musicians and
artists with its global resources and becomes a tool for creative individuals to produce alternative territories and lifestyles.

Following the first chapter, in Chapter two I trace the origin and development of China’s sound art since 1998 and outline the field of sound art culture constituted by various practices in China during the post-Tiananmen era, including art installations, musical performances, art or music festivals, as well as art activism. To avoid ascribing a hierarchical structure or linear history to sound art culture in China, I use the conceptual model of “rhizome” from Deleuze and Guattari to present the sound art culture as a field with multiple terrains, distinct with unique sonic intensities yet connected as a living organism. It is a field with multiple entryways. One gets access to the field either through one or multiple terrains, through practice or conceptualization.

In Chapter three, I examine collective affects related to a series of freedom-searching acts in the context of sound art culture in the post-Tiananmen era in China. Through events related to human rights, social justice, global capitalism, and the art market in China, I analyze affects of anxiety and powerlessness that characterize sound art culture’s “affective bearing or orientation, or “et toward the world” (Ngai 2005, 29). I argue that various freedom-searching events involving artists and musicians in the sound art culture, while achieving certain socio-political significance, intensify collective anxiety and powerlessness. Moreover, in this chapter, I propose the political possibility of the senses. I argue that freedom-searching acts not only include the kinds that focus on the state\textsuperscript{5} or the free market, but also include art practices that challenge everyday

\textsuperscript{5} I use “the state” throughout the dissertation to refer to the Chinese state, which is also known as the party-state.
sensual perceptions and call for “sensing beyond security” to achieve the state of 自在
[spontaneous becoming or self-existing] (Manning 2007; Mattin 2009).

Chapter four investigates how freedom registers as utopian impulses in an
improvisational music collective known as Raying Temple. Raying Temple is both the
name of a music venue and an identity for a group of musicians living in the outskirts of
Beijing. I discuss the affective ambience of the utopian collective by analyzing various
characteristics of Raying Temple, including the design of the place, means of
consumption, and the collective’s central beliefs. At Raying Temple, free improvisation
contributes to the formation of alternative social bonds in contemporary China.

Chapter five focuses on contradictions in the reception of sound art outside of
Beijing and outside music-oriented circles. The dissonance—between sound art practice
and performance art practice, between musical venues and gallery spaces—enhances a
richer understanding of the conditions cementing the kind of connectivity discussed in
Chapter 4. The word freedom appeared in either the titles or logos of both music venues,
which intend to serve as the spatial references for freedom in the city. Although the word
freedom does not directly appear in names of two contemporary art galleries Mini Midi
group performed in, the idea of freedom is implicit in experimental and interdisciplinary
art practices both galleries tend to support— to make art free from pre-established canons
or rules and to create arts without disciplinary boundaries. By analyzing dissatisfactions
and conflicts that occurred in the two art spaces, I pose questions regarding the
interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary nature of contemporary art practice in China and
the related issues and problems.
In the conclusion chapter, I propose what sound art does, drawing from both Christoph Cox’s model of sonic materialism and Chinese philosophical ideas. A model of signification, which is especially useful in investigating musical meanings in social, cultural, and discursive domains, nonetheless fails to capture extra-linguistic aspects of sound. Focusing on signification, this model falls short of addressing the question of what extra-linguistic or non-communicable experience of sound does to us. Instead, the model of sonic materialism developed by Christoph Cox takes account of the forces and flows of sound that do not necessarily mean anything but that still affects listeners. I use affective listening to frame the kind of listening mode afforded by sound art. I suggest that affective listening is the way through which one transforms to be free and spontaneous. At the same time, while some sound artists distance themselves from social activism by emphasizing self-cultivation through music and art, these artists seem to suggest that there are no political or social reference in their artistic practice. However, I argue that their focus on the sound work itself, on challenging the sensual, and cultivating a free and spontaneous self is highly social and political because they reject prescribed socio-cultural ideologies and values.

In general, this project is about sound and sound artists and Beijing, with the undercurrent of ideology and the affect of freedom rumbling throughout. It is about connections between concepts and practice, art and life, thinking and feeling, self and other, as well as the dynamics inherenting in of all these connections. Making and Unmaking Freedom articulates several layers in relation to freedom. It is the researcher that deconstructs freedom with materials drawn from both theories and practices. At the
same time, it is the artists and musicians who are making and unmaking freedom as they are figuring out their ways of living a free life independent of homogenizing and alienating forces.

The project suggests that China’s sound art opens a space for an investigation of how the sign of freedom functions in contemporary Chinese society as well as how the sign is deterritorialized and returned to “the plane of immanence.” China’s sound art practice is concerned with the sign of freedom in its multiple modalities: protesting against social injustices, criticizing consumerism and capitalism, resisting the art market and the music industry, and living a subcultural lifestyle distanced from the mainstream’s taste and values controlled by the global market. At the same time, China’s sound art practice aspires to a kind of felt-aliveness and changeability, that is 自在 [spontaneous becoming or self-existing]. To deterritorialize the sign of freedom, sound artists abandon rules of how to make art and instead commit to forces, intensities, and flows of sound materials. Deterritorializing freedom is committing to “the plane of immanence” with only intensities, haecceities, becomings and virtual potentialities (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Massumi 2002). By doing so, one could break habitual ways of sensing, performing, and living. This is what Jean-Luc Nancy means by “being free” (2002), and what Chinese artists means when they suggest that making sound art is the practice of self.
CHAPTER 1
SOUNDING BEIJING

The Passage of the Refrain. The refrain moves in the direction of the territorial assemblage and lodges itself there or leaves. In a general sense, we call a refrain any aggregate of matters of expression that draws a territory and develops into territorial motifs and landscapes (there are optical, gestural, motor, etc., refrains).

Deleuze and Guattari “A Thousand Plateaus”

He raised his head and looked into the distance, once again trying to draw our attention to the sound environment of Beijing: the train, always the train. They are running day and night on the plains, the rumbling metallic sound diffused into buildings, plants, air and the dust within.

Yan Jun “Sound and the City”

Beijing is not one city, but is double, triple, and quadruple cities. As the place for my fieldwork, Beijing already performs as at least three cities: one I read or heard about, one I experience, and one I describe in my writing. There is also one city of Beijing I never fully enter, which I do not know how to feel or think about. I make efforts to come to certain cities of Beijing, but there is always a city of Beijing that comes to me.

From a map of Beijing, one sees a city patterned with roads, centers, districts, signs, and geographical relations. However, a map as such rarely inscribes and shows affective territories of Beijing—territories that possess their own sensuous motifs and rhythms, that affect and are affected by outside forces, and that constantly pass their affective forces into each other. It is in the sense of affective territories that Beijing becomes multiple and that plural subjectivities are produced. Here, I propose to make an alternative map of Beijing, with affective territories inseparable but different from geographic places. This alternative map does not give directions, but conveys
expressions, or rather affects. It would be too ambitious to complete the entire map of Beijing in this chapter. My primary goal is to map affective territories as spatial references of political, artistic and commercial freedom in Beijing and to identify on the refrains on these affective territories—“a signature” to use Deleuze and Guattari’s term—that gives rise to other refrains.

A refrain carries an affective territory’s motif, but a refrain is first of all essential for the emergence of a territory. Here, refrain is related to music but has to be considered beyond musical terms. According to Deleuze and Guattari, refrain is “any aggregate of matters of expression that draw a territory and develops into territorial motifs and landscapes” (1987: 323). For them, anything that becomes expressive has the potential to be a territory. In their words, “What defines territory is the emergence of matters of expression (qualities)” (315):

Take the example of color in birds or fish: color is a membrane state associated with interior hormonal states, but it remains functional and transitory as long as it is tied to a type of action (sexuality, aggressiveness, flight). It becomes expressive, on the other hand, when it acquires a temporal constancy and a spatial range that make it a territorial, or rather territorializing, mark: a signature. (315)

Following Deleuze and Guattari, any matter or anything that becomes expressive has the potential to territorialize or refrain. In other words, a refrain is territorial. Its role is to capture chaotic and transitive affective forces and give them a temporary form (I will
explain “temporary” later). Or as Deleuze and Guattari vividly put it, a refrain “always carries earth with it; it has a land (sometimes a spiritual land) as its concomitant” (312).

Bertelsen and Murphie, drawing from Deleuze and Guattari, describe the territorial role of refrain. They argue that territories are always falling apart because their affective forces are transitive and in a constant variation. They further point out the affective power of refrain itself while explaining its relation with affects:

As transitions between other transitions, passages in a field of relays, affects have actual and virtual sides. They are actual for example in sensations or emotions as a kind of coming into being that is nevertheless always in transition (Massumi 2002, 35, 2007). They are virtual in that they carry “unactualized capacities to affect and be affected” (Delanda 2002, 62). None of this finds final form except in refrain, with its looping of “temporal contours” and resonances. The form of a refrain is not, there, a stable distribution of “formed” affects. It is an erratic and evolving distribution of both coming into being and the power to affect or be affected. This is its power. (2010, 145)

A refrain’s ability to be affected makes affective territories open, malleable, processual, and fragile to outside forces. A refrain invites crisis. Moreover, refrains potentialize new refrains that constitute other affective territories.

The conceptual tools of affect, refrain, and territory assist me in accomplishing the goal of mapping affective territories and identifying their refrains or signatures. Specifically, in my analysis of fieldwork materials, I attend to the frequent spatial
references in discourses and events related to freedom in Beijing, and I identify two places—Tiananmen and 798 Art District. In the first section of this chapter, I begin with an introduction to the overall spatial characteristics of Beijing as it becomes a global city. I focus on Chaoyang district, which is identified as a cosmopolitan or transnational space in Beijing (Ren 2011; Wu 2005). In the second and third sections, I discuss Tiananmen as the spatial reference of political freedom and 798 Art District as the spatial reference of artistic and commercial freedom in Beijing. I also identify both territories’ critical refrains that mark the emergence of affective forces shaping contemporary sensuous life in Beijing, particularly as part of China’s sound art culture.

The Global City of Beijing

Beijing shimmers with its real and imagined, ancient and modern, local and global sensibilities. Similar to other global cities in the network of the capitalist world economy, the spatial dispersion of production in Beijing reflects and facilitates the city’s economic shift from socialist production\(^6\) to the service industry (Currier 2008; Ren 2011). A series of city plans were made to enhance the globality of Beijing. In 1992-3, the “Beijing Plan for 1991-2010” proclaimed Beijing as an international city, open in all aspects. In 2003-4, the “Greater Beijing Plan” suggested to create a “humanistic” and “habitable” Beijing. The 2008 Olympics also proved to be significant for intensifying “the magnitude of global connectivity of Beijing” (Ren 2009). Urban space keeps

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\(^6\) According to Ren, socialist production in Beijing began after 1949 due to Chinese communist leaders’ “animosities toward the conspicuous consumption and lifestyles of the cities in the republican period.” Ren writes, “after the CCP came to power in 1949, it initiated a series of reforms to purge urban evils and to transform the pre-1949 consumption cities into socialist production centers” (Ren 2011: 57).
expanding, with more new residential and specialized centers radiating from the old city center (Wu 2008; Tian 2009).

However, to better map Beijing’s affective territories, historical discourses have to be paired with experiential accounts. As Lefebvre suggests in *Rhythmanalysis*, with the body as the point of contact, the social and biological, sensual and rational have a better chance to co-exist (Lefebvre 2004). A rhythmanalyst, as Lefebvre describes, calls on all senses and garbs oneself in the tissue of the lived, and the everyday (21). With the sensibility of a rhythmanalyst, I paid more attention to the everyday life in Beijing, as well as its sounds, scents, and heat.

**My Arrival in Beijing**

The heat overwhelmed me the moment I walked outside of the lobby of Beijing Capital International Airport. The temperature outside was reported to be 41 degree Celsius (106 degree Fahrenheit). The heat, dust and crowds made breathing unbearable. My rented apartment, Yan Jun’s first home when he moved to Beijing, was on the 24th floor, like a tiny nest within forests of high-rise buildings. From the apartment windows there was no open scene of the city, instead, I was enclosed by windows and balconies. I stayed inside the air-conditioned apartment for the first day. With the doors and windows tightly closed, swirls of heat were kept outside, as were the sounds, smells, and lights of the city. Looking down from the balcony, I saw elderly people walking tiny dogs, grandmas watching their grandchildren playing in the yard decorated with trees and artificial rock hills, a young woman walking in the direction of a small grocery store in her pajamas, and a middle-aged man entering my building who was carrying a stack of
beer in his three-wheel cart. The community was built with its own enclosure almost as a semi-society, with its food market, street vendors, grocery stores, fitness centers, and a neighborhood committee. The balcony was disconnected from outside streets; just as how the community was made so that one’s living space disjoins the working space.

I started to venture outside of this “community” made of concrete buildings. It took some exploring until I discovered the most direct route to my building. I picked up city codes that helped me adapt to local life. For example, the shortcut to the supermarket was through an iron fence separating the residential community from the supermarket. One iron bar was missing and it became a small gate, perfect for an average Chinese body. I learned that I had to bring my own bag to the fruit shop and the sales girls did not like people to touch the displays. The barbeque sold from cart vendors smelled wonderful, but sickened stomachs. I could wait for a stranger to share a whole watermelon sold by the couple downstairs, who operated their business out of a small van. People, who spent the entire day indoors away from the oppressive heat, started to trickle out to the streets after 8pm, chatting and gossiping while watching their unleashed dogs. Soon I found that my residential community was situated in an interesting neighborhood. My online search for nearby bookstores, coffee shops, bakeries, and restaurants directed me to a commercial center called “Jianwai SOHO.” It embodied modern tempos and sensations. It was trendy, artsy, and sexy.
Becoming “Global” on the Periphery

Beijingers describe and calculate distances by ring roads. The sixth ring-road was completed and put into use in September 2009. Located within the second ring-road is the heart of Beijing, where the Forbidden City, Tiananmen Square and the central base of the Chinese government are located. My neighborhood was located within Chaoyang district, between east third and fourth ring-roads. Jianwai SOHO is a commercial center containing several hundred stores, companies, and galleries, as well as public space for commercial, cultural and artistic events. Close to Jianwai SOHO, SOHO Modern City and Postmodern City are two newly built residential centers in this district, targeted at young white-collar workers, foreigners, overseas returnees, freelancers, and independent
artists. In Chaoyang, there are also more foreign restaurants and supermarkets with imported goods from North America and Europe. Wu Hung describes this district as the most cosmopolitan area in Beijing and points out its strategic location as the home of foreign embassies and many international companies, as well as “independent artists” who have been moving to this district since the 1990s (Wu 2005, 235). Ren’s research further suggests that the CBD built in the Chaoyang district embodies the local business and political elites’ vision of a kind of modernity that prioritizes the transnational capitalist class and excludes the majority of urban residents (Ren 2011: 58). My childhood friend, an accountant working in a Beijing architecture company, jokingly nicknamed the Chaoyang district “the district for fake foreigners.” Surprisingly, she had never been to the 798 Art District since she came to Beijing in 2006. It was too far away from where she worked and lived (almost two hours by public transportation if the traffic was smooth). Apparently, the art scene had little relevance to her everyday concerns.

Besides foreign restaurants, cafés, and foreign embassies, contemporary art is another important element contributing to the cosmopolitan feeling in the Chaoyang district. The majority of contemporary art spaces in Beijing, including 798 Art District, Caochangdi Art District, and Jiuchang Art District, are all located in Chaoyang, fostering an exuberant contemporary art scene that is important not only for Beijing but for all of China. The geographical layout of the art scene partially reveals that city planners and governors have already recognized the strategic importance of art and culture in city branding for specific desired and imagined identities. Art and culture benefit the city financially, as a result of the “aesthetic economy” of bars, restaurants, cafés, galleries and
design firms that cater to the making and selling of eclectic lifestyle experience (Lloyd 2006). Through contemporary art, Beijing links to other global cities with art as high-value commodities (Yeoh 1999). Contemporary art spaces serve as new spaces for the flow of art products, as well as a human flow of expert artists, expressive specialists and world tourists attracted by the cosmopolitan ambience (Currier 2008; Ren 2009; Yeoh 1999). Ultimately, these art spaces help the maximization and accumulation of capital in the global marketplace (Ren 2009; 2011). The development of the Chaoyang district is a product of the city’s macro urban planning and conforms to the state’s political-economic policy.

SOHO communities are young and ambitious. Unlike traditional Siheyuan’s enclosed architectural style, SOHO spaces embody the idea of embracing varieties and making all spaces open. They are postmodern spaces epitomizing entrepreneurs’ economic ambition and an emerging new lifestyle. Jianwai SOHO was designed by Riken Yamamoto, whose design was selected out of two other proposals; Yamamoto’s design stresses “minimalism, with high-tech, modern–looking, and strong visual appeals, all characteristics sought after by the developers” (Ren 61). Together with avant-garde architecture, the bloom of contemporary art spaces further enfolds and generates urban desires for freedom in artistic expression and alternative ways of life.

On the other hand, compared with the recent emergence of SOHO spaces, Tiananmen Square (the spatial reference of political freedom in China) boasts nearly six hundred years of history. For older generations, it is still the symbol of national liberation, echoing Chairman Mao’s proclamation of the founding of the People’s
Republic in his Hunan accent. With an aura of ancient royalty and modern socialist spirit, Tiananmen remains the most powerful symbol for the state.

**Tiananmen Square**

The affective territory of Tiananmen Square can be listened to, walked through, thought of, and talked about. Its affective territory gathers paradoxical and ambiguous affective forces of fear, pride, aversion, love and anger. Tiananmen conserves the “redness” of the Party through the huge framed portrait of Mao Zedong that serves as its backdrop, the annual National Day military parade, and the everyday flag-raising ceremony that takes place there. However, Tiananmen also preserves anger, fear, and anxiety manifested in discourses about the 1989 Tiananmen student protest, censored rock music, and contemporary art works. In the following, I discuss the conflicting affective forces of Tiananmen Square and analyze the refrain (or the signature) of the affective territory that further gives rise to other refrains. The refrain I identify “marks the intersection of heterogeneous modes of subjectivation” and is called a “complex refrain” by Guattari (2006, 199). I suggest that the complex refrain of Tiananmen Square gives rise to heterogenous subjectivities to challenge the intentionally homogenized national subjectivity through the state controlled media, cultural, and educational practices.

**“I love Beijing Tiananmen”**

“I love Beijing Tiananmen,
Over Tiananmen rises the Sun
Our great leader Chairman Mao
Leads us marching on.”

This children’s song was composed by Jin Yuelin, a 19-year-old apprentice in the Shanghai Glass Factory in 1970. The lyrics were written by Jin Huolin, a 12-year-old fifth-grade student. It immediately became a hit song with its first official broadcast on China National Radio in 1971. After that, it was taught in kindergartens and primary schools, and was sung throughout the country. The little melody and simple words, repeated through children’s voices, ascribe a favorable emotion to Tiananmen Square and the CCP (Chinese Communist Party).

Indeed, there seems to be a secret, intergenerational attachment to Tiananmen Square. The first time I arrived in Beijing in 2008, my friend, too busy with her work, sent her mother to pick me up from the airport. We went directly to Tiananmen Square. Her mother, an old Communist Party member, felt it should be the first place for me to visit in Beijing. A high school friend working in Shanghai came to Beijing for sightseeing. He sent me a text message leaving the train station that said, “I went to Tiananmen. This is my first time in the capital city!” The young sound artist Li Zenghui told me that he did not like to travel or do any kind of sightseeing. The first time he went to Beijing for a show with his band, they visited Tiananmen Square before hurrying back to Qingdao, his home city.

Over the years, innumerable people, rural and urban, local and foreign, young and old and even the unborn, have their pictures taken in front of Tiananmen. Many people still wake up before sunrise to attend the two minutes and seven seconds flag rising ceremony. In 2005, Peter Cusack led a sound project titled My Favorite Beijing Sounds
as part of Sound and the City (see more discussion of the project in Chapter two). “I was only 8 years old when I watched the national flag-raising ceremony for the first time,” one Beijinger explains in a recording. “The sound of the firm steps of those soldiers has been engraved in my mind. Even now I find it sacred. As a native Beijing citizen, I feel happy that I could watch at Tian’anmen Square”(Gray and Yan 2007). However, such favorable feelings constitute only a small part of current affective forces in Tiananmen Square. After the horror of June 4th, 1989, this favorable affect has ultimately been disrupted.

**Tiananmen Students’ Protest in 1989**

Discourses about Tiananmen Square and June 4th continue endlessly. Over a nighttime snack from the street market during the Mini Midi 2010 Wuhan tour, two artists, Elke Marhöfer7 from Germany and the sound artist Yan Jun from Beijing, broke into a heated discussion:

Yan: Tiananmen Square is not designed for people, but to show the world that we have the biggest square, the largest population. We have lots of people here, not as individuals, but as a whole.

Elke: But when it was designed, it was made for people.

Yan: No, not for people.

Elke: Yeah, I know, but the design is for people, many people to gather.

Yan: Tiananmen is designed for people without any agency. But in the West, a square is designed for people with agency. People here are gathered for show [sic].

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7 Elke Marhöfer is a Berlin based visual artist, and organizer of a series of workshops titled “Material for Analyses for Opposition.”
They are not coming here on [sic] their free will. They are used, of course not necessarily by the government.

Elke: But in 1989, Tiananmen Square was for the speech of the people, for the few weeks.

Yan: I don’t think so.

Elke: I don’t know. But for example, in Shanghai, they build these architectures in the People’s Square. I believe the square in Shanghai was built, at the beginning, similar to Tiananmen, but now it is totally redesigned. You don’t find your way in it. But in Beijing, Tiananmen Square is still the same. Without Tiananmen, 1989 would not happen [sic], because there would be [sic] no place for so many people to gather to change something. I don’t believe this is the way to go to change something necessarily. But is People’s Square in Shanghai, I was thinking, a sign of fear?

No one knows for sure whether Tiananmen is more for showing the authority of the Party or for representing free speech. The conversation nonetheless confirms that Tiananmen evokes conflicting feelings of fear, excitement, and anxiety. In an interview with both Yan Jun and He Xiaoyu (a Beijing-based music critic and writer),8 He Xiaoyu revealed the affective impact of the June 4th incident on his childhood and his later engagement with various independent and underground cultural activities:

1989 was a terrible shock in my childhood. When I was watching cartoon programs on TV, suddenly there was news showing bodies burned by the army.

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8 Conversation occurred in Yan Jun’s apartment, Beijing, July 15, 2009.
It was scary, biologically. It was also a strong stimulation for me. Later after that I was exposed to rock music, literature, art, liberalism, and democratic society.

The event of 1989 was the critical moment for me to start questioning the legitimacy of the CCP. The fraud of this history exists in the contemporary time, now, in our life.

He Xiaoyu’s description made me realize that once one entered this affective territory of Tiananmen, one would hardly be able to find an exit and break free from its associated affective forces. Furthermore, not being part of the actual student protest did not prevent Yan Jun and He Xiaoyu from feeling the kind of affective intensity that emitted from the “throbbing crowd” of protesting students (Canetti 32). In fact, it was the density and intensity of the crowds with which both Yan Jun and He Xiaoyu were too familiar. In the pre-signifying process, the energy and throbbing rhythm formed in a massive live rock music concert resembled what had been formed through students’ protests. During this process, individuals stayed close to each other, vibrating to the same rhythm, either of protest slogans or drum and guitar beats. Such massive yet singular throbbing contained a threatening and contagious power, awaiting the moment of becoming expressive and territorial.

The affective territory of Tiananmen Square has its own spatiality and temporality; one does not have to physically have been in the square during the time of the strike in order to enter the affective territory. As Yan Jun said in the same conversation with He Xiaoyu and me, “Everyone experienced 1989, even those born in the 1990s. They at least experienced the cleaning-up process. You experience the entire social environment. Our life today is based on 1989, the social atmosphere is based on
it.” To trace the emergence of the affective power of Tiananmen Square is to find its critical refrain.

**The Tank Man**

![Tank Man of Tiananmen, June 4th, 1989](http://chinadigitaltimes.net/china/tank-man/)

To put it bluntly, the affective territory of Tiananmen Square emerged in the tank man event, when the event was becoming expressive, that is “when it acquired a temporal constancy and a spatial range” (Deleuze and Guattari 315). If we look at the picture of

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the tank man, we see an unarmed thin man standing in front of four moving tanks. The picture freezes a moment between life and death, slowing down the speed of a confrontation between man and machine. The short distance between the tank man and tanks contains an immobile intensity. It is a living immobility, containing speeds within the stillness. Its “vitality affects” develop in time (Bertelsen and Murphie 2010; Stern 2004). The vitality affect in the moment of confrontation becomes visible first through a pictorial refrain. Later, it refrains in posters, TV-news, and artwork. Its refraining creates a persistent moment pregnant with possibilities, interpretations, and consequences. The intensity of the moment never dissipates. It revealed and reveals the threatening power of the people, the state, and its army. In the refrain of the tank man moment, something shocking happened quickly, out of nowhere, again and again. The tank-man event thus became the signature of the affective territory of Tiananmen. The refrain of the tank man deterritorializes; it disrupts harmonious melodies that secure the positive affects of Tiananmen Square. It comes from the outside, challenging to open the previously ideologically controlled affect to unknown sensibilities.

The affective territory of Tiananmen Square gives rise to other refrains. Many artworks have used Tiananmen as their subject matter. One example is Song Dong’s performance art titled *Breathing*, in which the artist lay down in Tiananmen Square on his stomach on a winter night, forming a thin layer of ice under his body (Wu 2005). Other well known examples include Ai Weiwei’s picture of his performance art in which he gave the middle finger to Tiananmen Square and exposed his chest written with the word “FUCK” in red, as well as the more widely circulated picture of his wife’s
performance art in which she lifted her skirt and exposed her underwear in Tiananmen Square.

The refrain of the tank man in the event of June 4th incident is also a crucial force in changing the sonic trajectory for the underground music culture. Yan Jun commented, “After June 4th, there is no longer music for expression.” While in this statement he criticized the inability for post-Tiananmen music industry to have any sincere expressions, he also hinted at the event’s impact on the underground music culture. For Yan, June 4th was the climax of a massive emotional expression of all the pent-up conflicts during the process of social and political reform over the past decades. However, the abruptly halted expression for democracy and freedom caused by violence and massive death traumatized many people, particularly intellectuals and artists in China. What happened on June 4th resists interpretation or explanation. Musical lyrics used in the protest that declared freedom, democracy, and justice lost their significance. Mixed with self-skepticism and distrust, noise musicians delved into chaotic sonic forces to seek a way out of self-delusion or delusion by others. Unlike pre-June 4th rock music, noise music does not give rise to individual heroism. Its chaotic expression, lacking objects and subjects, is a way of resistance, confrontation, and self-protection.

Paradoxically, these new refrains secure what they de-territorialize. They are what “assure the consistency of the territory” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 327). The affective territory of Tiananmen Square and the refrains it further gives rise to in different cultural domains constitute a kind of political and aesthetic sentiment unique to the city of Beijing in the post-Tiananmen era.
Affective territories are fluid and malleable. They leak into each other, intensify or deterritorialize each other. The national pride, socialist nostalgia and political tension carried by the affective territory of Tiananmen, find bold—yet safe—expression in another territory, 798 Art District. If the state-controlled media sometimes functions to anaesthetize the public’s emotion towards politically sensitive spaces like Tiananmen Square, 798 Art District proves to be an example of another extreme: a hyperaesthetic space overdosed with styles, attitudes and sensibilities.

798

798 Art District thrives on two sets of dichotomies—the traditional vs. the modern and socialist production vs. capitalist consumerism. These dichotomies have their direct spatial expression in 798 through plain Chinese noodle restaurants and trendy Italian cafés, greasy factories and funky bookstores. The affective territory of 798 harbors epiphanies, serendipities, belongings, and identifications, as well as pretensions, illusions and addictions. It is “an opium den,”10 “the avant-garde art colony of Beijing” (Dutton 2008). 798 blends aesthetics and politics with commodities. Here, everything appears artsy: the smoky chimneys, dusty bicycles, grungy artists, and young salesgirls staring blankly at the floating crowds.

Fashion/Art Show in 798 During the National Day of Mourning

August 14, 2010. After meeting the sound artists Yao Dajunin and Wang Changcun in the southern city of Hangzhou, I flew back to Beijing in the evening. It was near midnight when I arrived at the airport, and I was too exhausted to talk with the taxi.

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10 This metaphorical description comes from Yan Jun’s essay titled “798 是一个鸦片馆，老百姓来这里吸毒品” [“798 is an Opium Den, citizens come here to take drugs.”] http://www.douban.com/group/topic/14451803/
driver. He then turned on the radio. As he was searching for programs, I heard the same voice reporting the landslide disaster in Gansu province’s Zhouqu County. “Aha! It’s midnight, the national day of mourning starts.” The driver exclaimed. I was aware of the landslides but did not expect this national reaction.

The landslides hit Zhouqu County in Northwestern Gansu province at midnight on Sunday, August 8th, wiping out houses, buildings, and killing over a thousand residents, not counting the missing. To mourn the victims, the State Council declared August 15 a national mourning day. To mourn the victims of this disaster, all public entertainment was suspended. This included cinemas, karaoke bars, and Internet entertainment. On Sunday, August 15, only one television program and one radio program were broadcasted. The usually vibrant color schemes of domestic websites were replaced with somber black and white. Even the music that usually poured forth from the media shops along the streets was muted. Scheduled shows and concerts in bars and clubs in Beijing were postponed. A feeling of sadness prevailed. The same serious voice reporting the news over the course of an entire day, suggests the state’s power in massive affective control. This was unsettling for me.

A fashion/art show was scheduled at UCCA (Ullens Center For Contemporary Art) in the afternoon on Sunday in 798 Art District, and I thought it would also be cancelled. I called Weiwei (a.k.a.vavabond), a laptop musician invited to create sounds for the show, just to confirm. Surprisingly, the event was still happening.

Silence filled my taxi. On our way to 798, a friend told a joke she just saw from the Internet. “In the national day of mourning, a foreigner in Beijing constantly called
the front desk in his hotel, complaining that his TV set was affected by some unknown virus. The front desk clerk neglected his complaints at first, but finally could not bear his calls, and asked, ‘So what does it look like now?’ ‘100 channels all show the same program!’ the foreigner replied.”

I asked the person at the front desk of UCCA why this show was not canceled during the national day of mourning. The show was not public entertainment, but art.

Fig. 4. Fashion/Art show in UCCA, August 8 (photo by Author, 2010)
The unique power of the 798 Art District became salient during the national day of mourning. It was an art world, a utopian space within the city, officially sanctioned. I wandered outside of UCCA, waiting for the show to start. On the sidewalks, vendors were selling small paintings, handmade jewelry, and others were drawing portraits in 15 minutes (20 Yuan for a lifelike portraiture, 15 Yuan for a cartoon version) and writing calligraphy on Chinese fans. A trendy young woman displayed four small oil paintings from the backseat of a motorcycle. I stopped and looked at one resembling Munch’s “The Scream.” The screaming man had been changed to a woman with long black hair
and a milky white dress. She asked me to buy one and said it would be a great décor piece. She was an art student learning oil painting and these were her original works.

The small one cost 100 Yuan (about $15 U.S. dollars), the big ones at least 200 Yuan. “Much cheaper than those sold inside the galleries,” she added. In the meantime, three district inspectors came and took away the Chinese paintings a young man was selling, and asked him to leave. The middle-aged man who was drawing the portrait for a girl indicated to the young guy, “Just go, do not argue,” he said in a low voice, and then went back to his business. Why did only the young man have to leave, and not the others? “He does not have a street permit. He does not have connections. Those are fake paintings,” I heard from the crowd that formed almost in seconds.

I walked back to UCCA, passing the installation of three big red dinosaurs,11 which has already become a symbol for this gallery (see fig. 6). The gigantic caged T-Rexes, with an industrial and plastic look, sarcastically represented the globalization and commercialization of contemporary art, manufactured in China and then entering the global flow of the cultural capital. The artist Sui Jianguo intended for the piece to highlight the political economic system symbolized by its enormous size.12 By placing it outside at the entrance, UCCA seemed to intentionally show its economic power and status in the Chinese contemporary art market.

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11 The installation is made by Sui Jianguo, titled “Jurassic Age,” which is part of his series “Made in China.”
12 The complete quote from the artist reads, “The reason I enlarged the toys to such an enormous size is to highlight the political economic system behind [them]. Dinosaur toys are designed by some company from a Western country, and produced in China, then commercially distributed to the whole globe. It is the result of transnational capitalist production.”

http://we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/art_from_china/
Opened in November 2007, UCCA was founded and owned by a Belgian couple Guy and Myriam Ullens. It is located in one of the largest factory spaces in 798 and is one of the few places where ordinary visitors have to pay admission (Van Elzen 135). According to Van Elzen, the Ullens’s art collection is the second largest collection of contemporary Chinese art in European hands (135). Inside of UCCA, there is a gift store, exhibition spaces, an auditorium, an art library, a study, a café, and a restaurant.

To trace the emergence of the affective forces 798 Art District contains today, it is necessary to go back to the origin of when the nationally owned factories were
transformed into private art studios and later public galleries, and finally into a model of China’s creative industry.

**Production of 798: From the Factory to the Art Space**

In the mid-1950s, after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, Beijing was becoming a city of production, answering Mao Zedong’s call for an advanced socialism “based on heavy industry and communist ideology” (Wu 2008: 186). Van Elzen provides more details when he said that “[i]n 1957 the new industrial zones covered a total area of 2,200,00 sqm, while the net value of industrial production increased to twelve times the value in 1949” (128). In 1964, a large factory complex called 718 was carved into six factories: 706, 707, 718, 751, 797 and 798.13 718 was a state-run manufacturing factory producing electric components for radios for the People’s Liberation Army. It was opened on October 5, 1957. The construction of the factory was a collaboration between China and East Germany. Architects and engineers from the East German Telecommunication Industry Bureau designed the factory in a Bauhaus style, simple, sturdy and with high quality lights (Van Elzen 2010: 128). According to Wu Hung, during its construction from 1954 to 1957, three hundred German technicians worked on the site and “the project was considered as a shining example of the collaboration between China and her socialist brother countries” (2008: 185). 718 was the pride of the nation “as the largest joint factory in the entire socialist unification plan,” and it was a site where top Chinese leaders frequently visited with foreign guests (Wu 186). However, 718 economically declined after two major events in the late 1950s and the early 1960s: first, the deterioration of China’s relationship with the Soviet Union, and

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13 All the military factories throughout the country were named with numbers starting with 7.
subsequently, the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution.\textsuperscript{14} In 1964, 718 broke up into six independent factories to ease management. In 2001, the Seven Stars Electronic Group united all five factories except for 751 (Huang 2008; Wu 2008). Deng’s reform and open-up policy brought drastic changes to the nation, with the decline of state-owned heavy industry and rapid growth of the entertainment and commercial sectors. Also since the 1990s, the state ceased giving subsidies to many state-owned factories. As a result, units of 718 collapsed one after another, with thousands of workers laid off,\textsuperscript{15} and the warehouse becoming vacant.

The vacant space in 798 caught the attention of some artists for its low rent and architectural style, which was seen as an ideal space for art studios and exhibitions. When a few artists showed interest in renting the factories and warehouses, the factory owners immediately agreed. In 1995, the sculpture department of the China Central Academy of Fine Art rented the first warehouse for a large sculpture exhibition (Van Elzen 2010; Huang 2008). In the following six years, a few individuals rented factories for residence. These included already established artists, designers, and public intellectuals. 798 stayed primarily a private space until 2002. In April of that year, the \textit{Beijing Tokyo Art Gallery} was opened in one of the factories. Six months later, the gallery had its first exhibition \textit{Beijing Afloat}, which proved to be a turning point for 798. People from the art world attending this exhibition were attracted to the potential values of the factory space (Huang 2008). Within a short period of time, most of the empty

\textsuperscript{14} For further discussion of these two events, see Wu Hung’s \textit{Making History: Wu Hung on Contemporary Art}.

\textsuperscript{15} Wu Hung estimated eleven thousand workers and more than three hundred administrators have taken early retirement and three thousand workers have been laid off since 2002 (2008: 189).
spaces in 798 were taken. Only a few factories remained to produce technical equipment and military industrial electronic products.

The juxtaposition of its artistic, economic, cultural, social, and historical values makes 798 Art District even more appealing to both locals and foreigners. 798 embodies changes the space has undergone over the past 50 years, with fading Communist slogans visible high up on the walls, steam bursting forth from a factory still in operation, international restaurants, contemporary galleries, graffiti, radical performance art, installation art, cocktail parties, and commercial fashion shows.

Fig. 7. 798 old factories, From Beijing 798: Reflections on “Factory” of Art
In 2004, while there was already a substantial number of artists moving into 798, the landlord Seven Stars Electronic Group (subsequently referred to as Seven Stars) planned to demolish the whole complex and build shopping centers and apartment buildings. As Sus Van Elzen explains, the Beijing city council had approved the plan because the location offered great business potential. “It is estimated that the land under 798 now has a value of at least a billion Yuan, which is about 100 million Euro” (124). Ren discusses the first clash between Seven Stars and artists before the launching of DIAF 2004 (Dashanzi International Art Festival) (Ren 2009). In an open letter from
Seven Stars to artists, Seven Stars required artists to have governmental permission to hold the festival; otherwise, they would reserve the right to shut down the activity.\textsuperscript{16} The festival was eventually held with direct and indirect help from international mainstream media and foreign embassies in Beijing (Ren 2009). However, Seven Stars ultimately insisted on shutting down art district by refusing to renew artists’ leases.

Artists, along with Li Xiangqun, a professor at the Academy of Arts and Design at Qinghua University, began a protest against the demolition plan. In 2005, as a member of the People’s Congress in Beijing, Li Xiangqun submitted a proposal calling for the preservation of 798 (for further discussions of the conflicts and protest, see Ren 2009, Elzen 2010.) In 2006, the city and district officials visited 798 a few times and decided to incorporate it into one of Beijing’s first creative industry clusters, to be supported by the newly established Beijing Cultural and Creative Industry Promotion Center that November. 798 was soon promoted as one of the top must-see places in Beijing, equal to the Summer Palace. The city government’s intention, as Ren suggests, was to use 798 to demonstrate an official tolerance towards contemporary art, especially anticipating the wide media coverage of Beijing during the 2008 Olympics (2009). 798 Art District was preserved, but was also transformed into a tourist site and regulated by the city

\textsuperscript{16} As Ye Ling quotes in his article “weightlessness-798 in the present continuous tense,” the open letter to all tenants of Beijing Seven Star Co., issued three days before the opening ceremony of the first Dashanzi International Art Festival, reads “In order to ensure the security and the normal operation and production of the 718 area, the Seven Star Co.’s property management center respectfully announces the following to all tenants: if all individuals decide to take matters into their own hands and forcibly hold the so-called ‘Dashangzi International Art Festival’ without receiving governmental permission in the form of the ‘Large Scale Social Activity Permit’, Seven Star Co.’s property management center in accordance with all relevant governmental laws, and property management regulations, reserves the right to forbid such activities. The right is also reserved to forbid entry to all personnel and vehicles that do not belong to the area during the holding of the festival. We appreciate the understanding and support of the tenants.” See more discussion and description of the letter in Huang 29-30.
government. Many artists moved outside of 798 due to the drastic increase in rent and tourist traffic (Ren 2009). 798 has almost acquired a brand name and has become a salient example of the government’s recognition of art and culture as for part of political and economic development (Currier 2008; Elzen 2008; Huang 2008; Ren 2009, 2011; Ren and Sun 2011).

The crisis of 798 marked the emergence of an artistic-commercial-political territory, which possesses affective forces of a place and subjects a place to affective forces from the outside. The affective territory of 798 plays a crucial role in Beijing’s imaginary “New York-ness,” or “Tokyo-ness.” Admittedly, Beijing is not as globalized and capitalized as the cities of Tokyo, New York or London, and its “New York-ness,” or “Tokyo-ness” is mimicry. However, desires and anxieties generated in its imagination are no less real and intense. It is necessary to recognize that although the 798 Art District was saved from Seven Stars’ demolition plan, after 2006 it was no longer simply a commercialized art district. It began to play a role in city and state politics; the city and state also began to have more direct control over artistic expressions in 798 (see more in chapter 3). In comparison with the tank man event as the refrain, or the motif of Tiananmen Square, the crisis of 798 was less dramatic and also developed over a longer period of time. Despite the differences, the two territories “communicate” with each other. They generate anxieties, excitement, powerlessness, playfulness, and hipness that make Beijing both desirable and detested.
Coming to Beijing

Collective affective forces pass from place to place, place to person, and person to person, constituting multiple cities of Beijing where reality and fantasies clash and where multiple subjectivities emerge, encounter each other, and go on their separate ways. Watching the national flag raising on Tiananmen Square – sipping espresso on a late afternoon in the 798 Art District – being caught up in a heavy traffic jam – scavenging antiques in the market square Panjiayuan – watching a nomadic singer passing by on the subway train singing gleefully or melancholically. Every day, we walk in Beijing with or without a destination, with or without feelings. We walk in geographical places—but also in, through, and across affective territories that drain or increase our affective capacities.

Beijing, with ever-evolving affective forces, engulfs its dwellers. It shelters and also endangers. It allures, captures, hurts, and grabs those who still harbor even a tiny bit of urban dreams and desires. Ruptures and crises are needed to keep spaces open to potentialities (for example, ruptures of the tank man and of the artists’ protest in 798). In Guattari’s words, they are “poetic-existential catalysis” that “promote active, processual ruptures within semiotically structured, significational and denotative networks” (Chaosmosis 19). The catalysis could be De Certeau’s “everyday creativity,” or miniscule tactics—taking an iron bar from the fence to create a shortcut, making a little garden for afternoon tea out of a small piece of unused land in a residential community. Mobilized by expanding or diminishing affective territories, Beijing remains a gigantic desire-producing machine, monstrous yet fragile, surreal with actual and virtual
intensities. With maybe too much freedom of certain kinds and too little of some other kinds, there is always a version of Beijing that promises freedom.

Young people who include college graduates, migrant workers, artists, musicians, and writers leave their hometowns and come to Beijing for job opportunities or to follow their artistic dreams. Wu Wenguang’s documentary *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (released in 1990), depicts five young artists’ wandering life and their art community in Beijing. *Bumming* describes not only the actual unstable living situation of these young artists, but also captures the desirable and at the same time disgusted sensations of rootlessness and freedom. Although twenty years have passed since this documentary was released, the sensibility of longing, mixed with confusions and anxieties, for an authentic and free life in the capital city still finds resonance today.

Wang Fan, known as China’s first experimental musician, came to Beijing fifteen years ago from his hometown Lanzhou (a heavy industrial northwestern city) to look for like-minded people. Fenghao, an experimental musician and graphic designer, walked on foot throughout Beijing for two days as his way of entering the city twelve years ago. Yan Jun, a sound artist and writer, moved to Beijing twelve years ago from Lanzhou with a railway container filled with books, CDs and a writing desk. Li Yangyang, an experimental musician, arrived eight years ago with nothing but a dream of playing rock music, and lived for a year at a friend’s dorm in Xiangshan area, six miles to the west of Beijing. Four years ago, Li Zenghui, a sound and performance artist, quit his stable job in Qingdao to pursue his not yet fully lived creative life. When he first arrived in Beijing, Li Zenghui bought a second-hand antique saxophone made in East Germany with money
borrowed from friends. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, people like Wang Fan, Yan Jun, Yangyang, and Li Zenghui were called Bei Piao. Bei means north, specifically referring to Beijing; Piao means floating or drifting. Bei Piao is an identity used to describe people who work or live in Beijing without a permanent residential permit or registered residence. These Bei Piao artists and musicians constitute lines of drift, improvising with the city and the world.
CHAPTER 2

A THOUSAND ORIGINS OF THE FIELD OF CHINA’S SOUND ART

A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb “to be,” but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, “and…and…and…”

Deleuze and Guattari “A Thousand Plateaus”

After the June 4th incident, there is no music in China, only noise.

Yan Jun

In this chapter, I outline the field of sound art in China. Rather than creating a linear history of China’s sound art, I identify five origins crucial to the dynamics of the current sound art scene in China: underground rock music culture, Yao Dajunin and the art of sound, the year 2003, live festivals and concerts after 2003, and sound art in galleries and in the city. The purpose is to avoid positing a hierarchical structure to the field and to map the field as a rhizomatic terrain with its regions of intensities and lines of flight. A rhizomatic terrain is populated with multiple entries, each suggesting an origin, and together shape a complex connectivity (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Each entry suggests a ground zero in the field, territorializing its own living strata with important individuals, festivals, particular socio-historical events, or collective and individual

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17 Interview with the author, July 2009, Beijing. Yan referred to Theodor Adorno's famous saying that there can be no poetry after Auschwitz.

18 As Felicity J. Colman writes, “Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the ‘rhizome’ draws from its etymological meaning, where ‘rhizo’ means combining form and the biological term ‘rhizome’ describes a form of plant that can extend itself from its underground horizontal tuber-like root system and develop new plants. In Deleuze and Guattari’s use of the term, the rhizome is a concept that ‘maps’ a process of networked, relational and transversal thought, and a way of being without ‘tracing’ the construction of that map as a fixed entity.” Adrian Parr, ed. *The Deleuze Dictionary* (New York: Columbia University Press 2005) 231.

For further reading on “rhizome”, see *A Thousand Plateaus* by Deleuze and Guattari, *Deleuze and Music* edited by Ian Buchanan and Claire Colebrook, *Micropolitics of Media Culture: Reading the Rhizomes of Deleuze and Guattari* edited by Patricia Pisters.
projects. At the same time, each entry is in a dynamic alliance with one another, 
deterritorializing and reterritorializing. In addition, although the narration of the five 
entries is divided into five sections each with its own uniqueness, they should be viewed 
together as a porous organism that is always contingent on its own making and 
unmaking, connected through events, individuals, affects or ideas. Each entry described 
below and the entries yet to be discovered are separated from each other by dynamics and 
intensities rather than by boundaries. The five entries I construct should be viewed as an 
invitation for more input, when combined they mark a field of becoming.

During the first year Wang Fan lived in Beijing in 1996, he used a Walkman, a 
Hong Mian Guitar,19 and his throat to produce a 40-minute lo-fi music piece, which was 
later recognized by Yan Jun as China’s first experimental music.20 It was titled 
_Dharma’s Crossing_, and he included a thousand-word essay with the piece. In this piece, 
Wang Fan experimented with specially treated strings (heated, or with objects hung from 
them), placing a microphone in a Coca-Cola can, changing the position of the electric 
motor in a home-use audio recorder to produce low frequency background noise, and 
using different breathing and chanting techniques from Qigong and religious practices. 
Both the music and the writing reflect Wang Fan’s powerful spiritual worldview. The 
music critic and novelist Hu Lingyun once commented in 2006, “Even after ten years, 
when the Internet and software bring infinite possibilities in our listening experiences, 
this work still surprises us with its unprecedented avant-garde and experimental spirit.”

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19 **Hong Mian** is a guitar brand made in China. The factory was established in 1957 in Guangdong province. **Hong Mian** is recognized as one of the best and oldest brands for guitars in China.
Fifteen years later, in 2011, Wang Fan, along with two other Chinese sound artists Yan Jun and Li Jianhong and New York-based sound artist Jonathan Chen, gave a lecture in the sound art department in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago on China’s experimental music. During the discussion session, an audience member asked what kind of role the West plays in Chinese experimental music and sound art practice. After a short silence, during which no one responded, Wang Fan said in Chinese (and I translated into English): “The West is a condiment for Chinese experimental music making.” The audience laughed. Wang Fan might not be the best person to offer a generalizable answer to this question. He is such a unique artist, esoteric and as he says, “a paranoid schizo.” Driven by spiritual concerns, he rarely worries about what the rest of the music world is doing technologically or theoretically. Among amateur and autodidactic sound artists in China, Wang Fan is known for his radically and exclusively interior-driven personality.

During the laughter, I thought of another comment Lin Chi-Wei, a sound artist from Taiwan, made when we were standing outside of the studio Sugar Jar during an experimental music show in Beijing three years before. “There is no sound art in China.” It would be a fair critique, if the comment was based on the average quality and variety of existing practices in the sound art scene in China at that time, and if it reflected how sound art was defined in the West by particular Western sound artists or scholars. However, the West-East dialectic is unsettling, particularly because it reflects a tendency to make either the West or the East the original against which others are measured and judged as less authentic. It is important to investigate and discuss the East-West tensions, but I would like to divert our focus from the binary model to an alternative approach,
which recognizes the importance of contexts not as elements serving art practice, but as milieus that shape and transform practice.

**Entry One: Underground Rock Music Culture**

The first entry to the field is through China’s rock music, which began during the 1980s’. The following discussion begins with the early stage of rock music in China, focusing on its connection to trashed CDs imported from overseas, state censorship, and the June 4th Tiananmen incident. During the mid-1990s, rock music split into roughly two kinds, popular rock music managed by the music industry, and underground rock music which continued searching for new kinds of musical expression. Many of the sound artists came from underground rock music culture, which itself still remains a separate cultural practice. My analysis of underground rock music culture is based on archival research and ethnographic interviews. I describe a censored magazine titled *Free Music* which existed for less than a year but served as one of the most important sources introducing mainland music fans to avant-garde music, noise, and experimental music practiced around the world. I also discuss the origin of Sub Jam, which later became a defining and leading player in China’s sound art culture.

**The Rise and Decline of Rock Music in the Reform Era**

Although the “reform and open-up” policy of the 1980s has made many import and export businesses possible, it took longer for more varieties of cultural products to reach China’s socio-cultural domains. In terms of music, liuxing or tongsu music\(^\text{21}\) was

\(^{21}\) Jones distinguishes the two terms, *liuxing* and *tongsu* as follows: “in terms of everyday usage, popular songs that would be indistinguishable from folk songs (*minge*) without the accompaniment of electrified instruments and that cater to a middle-aged audience are generally referred to as *tongsu*, while music that has absorbed Western popular harmonies, and appeals to predominantly youthful audiences are called...
still the only officially recognized and legitimized music style in Mainland China since 1986 (Baranovitch 18). Bored by monotonous music styles and ideological implications of the lyrics, some musicians and fans started searching for new sounds. The “dakou generation,” also known as “saw-gash generation,” began in the late 1980s and lasted through the 1990s (Dutton 8). Dakou, or saw-gash, describes the small punch hole cut into the excess CDs by Western record companies prior to shipping them to China as trash, presumably unsellable. No one could have predicted that these trash CDs would nurture an entire rock music generation in Mainland China. Dakou CDs soon found a market in China, despite their ragged packaging and missing tracks of music. They became the main source of Western music for Chinese youths, satisfying a growing desire for new and different sounds. The dakou CDs not only enriched the music world for the dakou generation, but also acted as a conduit for so-called Western values, such as individualism and democracy, shaping and changing the listeners’ sensibilities and self-perceptions. Rock music, punk, and jazz provided a sense of rebellion and symbolized the freedom that Chinese youth had not experienced or expressed before. Along with the dakou CDs, foreigners, especially foreign students, were another important way rock music was introduced to China, especially in the capital city of Beijing. As Baranovitch suggests, many of the early rock bands in China were either formed by foreigners, or included them within their ranks (31).


22 Jones defined rock music as an essentially unofficial, underground phenomenon. Its musicians were “unemployed” amateurs, with no affiliation with any nationalized work unit, and the music practice was actively disapproved of and often restricted by the CCP. Andrew F. Jones. Like A Knife: Ideology and Genre in Contemporary Chinese Popular Music. (Ithaca, NY: East Asia Program Cornell University, 1992)
Among early Chinese rock musicians, Cui Jian, who was later called the godfather of China’s rock music, was the first to write songs. He made his first public appearance in an officially organized large-scale tongsu music concert in Beijing in May 1986. In this concert, Cui Jian debuted “Having Nothing,” a song symbolizing a post-Mao and post-Cultural Revolution ethos. It was a cry for individual freedom. It expressed the frustration and sense of alienation of a disillusioned generation of Chinese intellectuals and college students. Everything about the performance was a challenge to the authorities, including his appearance, the lyrics, and the performance style. At that concert, Cui Jian wore a loose yellow army shirt with his pants unevenly rolled up, and hung an old guitar on his neck. It was said that several high officials were offended by his performance and angrily left the concert hall (Zhao 1992). Since this first public appearance, rock music has been officially banned from state-run television and experienced strict censorship whenever live concerts were held (Baranovitch 33). Cui Jian was not allowed to give any large-scale performance until 1989 (Jones 1992b, 83). In March that year, right before the outbreak of the student demonstrations, Cui Jian held his first large solo concert at the Beijing Exhibition Hall, singing songs from his new album Rock and Roll of the New Long March. His songs—“Having Nothing and Nothing to My Name”—were used as anthems by the protesting students (Jones 1992b, 83). Rock music, used as a weapon, best expressed Chinese students’ demand for self-empowerment during the post-Revolutionary time.

Rock music became a fad on the mainland in the early 1990s in spite of the failure of the student protest and the June 4th Tiananmen incident (Baranovitch 36). Dozens of

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23 The year 1986 is considered the year of the birth of mainland pop (Baranovitch 2003:18).
new rock bands were formed around that time and regular live rock music shows were available in privately owned bars, clubs, or state-owned concert halls. As it became popular among the urban youth culture, rock music entered the public sphere, and was no longer marginalized or considered to be underground. “Rock spirit,” a term coined by the rock band Lunhui [Again] in 1995, suggested a fearless and rebellious attitude, as well as the adoption of a whole set of Western values (Baranovitch 40). The easing of official sanctions was another factor for the popularity of rock music immediately after the June 4th incident, although this may have been a deliberate attempt on the part of the party to reduce tension and to regain credibility among the youth (Baranovitch 37).

However, rock music’s popularity only lasted for a few years. Many rock bands wrote lyrics that directly or indirectly addressed the June 4th incident, and lyrics that expressed the anger with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In late 1993 and early 1994, the state started to place more restrictions on rock music performances, especially in Beijing. But this was only a minor factor in rock music’s waning fortunes. He Li’s Research also illustrated that people on the mainland showed less interest in going to rock music shows and concerts, or buying rock music albums. This suggested the general public’s decreased interest in politicized cultural products perhaps reflecting an

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24 Baranovitch commented on the westernization of China’s rock band that “the admiration for foreign, specifically Western culture went almost to the point of fetishization among significant portions of Chinese intellectuals and youth during the 1980s and early 1990s. This fetishization manifested itself in rock culture most clearly through the adoption of the music style itself and a whole set of Western values. Another important manifestation was the relatively extensive use of English. For many young Chinese intellectuals, among them rockers, westernization was synonymous with modernization and rock represented both” (40).

25 In an article, He Li compared Cui Jian’s concert with that of a Hong Kong pop star Andy Lau in 1993, and found that only one third of the seats in Cui Jian’s concert was occupied, and the ticket price dropped from 80 yuan to 3.5 yuan. In the same concert hall, 18,000 seats were occupied for Andy Lau’s concert, and the cheapest ticket was 700 yuan (He 1996).
increasing lack of concern with political issues. A major factor contributing to this shift in values was Deng Xiaoping’s “reform and open-up” policy, which made the quick development of the leisure industry possible. In the new economic era, the mainstream value system gradually changed from one of idealism to one of consumerism. The inherent pragmatism in this new policy created alternative means of attaining happiness and freedom through another channel, which were probably safer.

**Underground Noise: Departure from Rock Music**

Yan Jun once proclaimed, as I discussed in the introduction, “After the June 4\textsuperscript{th} incident, there is no music in China, only noise.”\textsuperscript{26} He added:

June 4\textsuperscript{th} is an important factor for our anxiety and it also urges us to search for the solution. The State-owned media creates ‘CCTV Spring Festival Gala’ and ‘CCTV One Song’ to comfort the public, to demonstrate that we are still a big community, living together. But in fact, we are not. We are separated by that event. We can no longer get together. We need illusions to see that we are still together.

For those from the underground culture, maybe the only way to avoid censorship is to make “meaningless” noises, to express without words or explicit ideology. Similar to the Italian Futurist Luigi Russolo, who believed that sounds capture the spirit of social life, Yan Jun suggests in this statement that the spirit of China’s social-cultural life in the post-Tiananmen era is best captured by noise (Cox and Warner 10).

Starting in the mid-1990s, most rock music bands and musicians, especially those based in Beijing, either joined the music industry or changed their direction and made

\textsuperscript{26} Interview with the author, July 2009, Beijing.
popular music. Many rock musicians led a hedonistic and self-indulgent lifestyle, squandering away what the aura of rock music had brought them. The title “underground” was used as a marketing strategy, as a sign of “coolness” and of being “Western.” These rock music bands were despised and considered above ground within the music circle. It was around this period that underground music culture departed from rock music. Some musicians sought out new sounds from more extreme music practices, including industrial noise music, punk music, extreme metal, and avant-garde electronic music. Although it is believed that the June 4th incident and the “reform and open-up” policy ended the age of idealism once prevalent in the 1980s, in the emerging underground music culture one could still feel the idealistic sensibility and the yearning for a free and authentic life. Underground musicians believed that one way to remain independent and self-aware was to make sounds without ideological clichés or soothing tones which would only cater to the tastes and aesthetic needs of certain classes.

During the mid-1990s, underground musicians had just started learning about noise, electronic, and experimental music, yet the resources were rather limited. Even though there were a few live noise and experimental music shows by foreign musicians in Mainland China, the majority of audiences and musicians (including rock musicians) were not ready to recognize and accept these new practices. There was very little documentation of early music shows and festivals during the mid-1990s. For example, in early 1993 the Japanese experimental musician Otomo Yoshihide and the Australian Jazz Violinist Jon Rose were invited to the Beijing International Jazz Festival. This was the earliest live experimental music performance in Mainland China, and little of it was
documented. In 1995, with the help of the artist and independent curator Ou Ning, the Hong Kong musician Dickson Dee (Li Chin Sung) toured the cities of Shenzhen, Fo Shan, and Beijing with the US avant-garde musician John Zorn and the Japanese noise musician Yamantaka Eye. Again, there is no record of this tour, and little is known about how it was received by the audience.27 As an organizer with his own independent music labels (Sound Factory, Sonic Factory, Noise Asia), Dickson Dee was the first person to introduce new trends in experimental music to Mainland China, but its influence did not reach far.

In its early stage, China’s underground music was predominantly composed of punk, gothic rock, heavy metal, and avant-rock bands. Musicians mainly imitated bands from the West. Experimental music was only an idea or style discussed or described in underground music journals and forums, and was rarely practiced. This situation made Wang Fan’s “Dharma’s Crossing” significant and groundbreaking. In 1998, Wang Fan was invited as a special guest to a public concert in Lanzhou. The concert “Spring of New Music, 1998” curated by Yan Jun, was to feature China’s non-Beijing based underground bands for the first time. Within the circle, it was called China’s Woodstock, and it would symbolize the “Independence day of Underground Rock.” Preparation for the show took over half a year, but the concert never occurred.28 However, this non-event proved to be crucial for the emergence of China’s sound art scene.

27 In an email, Yan Jun wrote to me that the performance in Fo Shan was terrible because of the site, more like a night club. The audience was throwing beer bottles and screaming at the musicians. For the one in Beijing, he said Cui Jian and some other musicians went to the show, but didn’t really understand what was going on.

28 Yan Jun described the event to me: an investor agreed to support this concert on the condition that Yan Jun first organized a concert for Cui Jian. But the investor did not make any money from Cui Jian’s concert, so he left without fulfilling his promise. Yan Jun lost his personal investment in preparing for this
Noise in Print: Sub Jam and Free Music

To memorialize this attempted concert, which was dedicated to Allen Ginsberg, Yan Jun made a fanzine and titled it *Sub Jam* (see fig. 9). This was the first time the term Sub Jam was used. As Yan Jun explained, the word “sub” refers to sub-cultures and things that are emerging, and “jam” means to make noise together. Printed on the front cover of the booklet, is a quote from Ginsberg. On the back, is the Chinese translation of Ginsberg’s poem, “Howl.”

Fig. 9. The front (left) and back (right) covers of *Sub Jam* fanzine

concert. Two weeks later, Wang Lei and Zhang Xiaozhou curated a concert in the city of Guangzhou “Spring of New Music 1998,” featuring Pan Gu, She Tou, Zhang qianqian, etc. 

29 The quote in Chinese reads: 纯粹的喜悦，你能获取拯救的唯一办法即是歌唱。换句话说，崛起，从被压抑的深渊中崛起，将灵魂提升到其自身的极乐境界和理解他人的办法，就是让你自己彻底地服从内心的欲望。形象取决于你灵魂的罗盘，有心向何处移动和心之所欲地罗盘所左右。然后，你匍匐而下，或五体投地，歌唱，祈祷，直到你进入狂喜和顿悟之间，那时，极乐将从体内充溢而出。
The booklet introduced fifteen non-Beijing based underground bands that were supposed to perform in this concert. Also, it collected articles of different lengths discussing underground music cultures in various cities in China including Shenyang, Lanzhou, Nanjing, Nanchang and Chengdu, but excluding Beijing. The first article reported on the underground music in the city of Shenyang in northeastern China from 1996-1997. The economies of Shenyang and all cities that focused on heavy industry, declined when the state shifted its emphasis to light and service-based industry. City life was depressing for the youths, and this became a central theme for underground music bands. As quoted in the article on Shenyang’s underground music scene, a member of Jiaoshui Nanhai [Boys stirring water] said,

I always feel that this city is a naked scar, and we are the blood flowing from it, with the truest color and the truest pain. Our music is to nail the lie of making progress. Maybe I will never become a poet with this kind of temperament. I only want to scream and shout for those who live at the bottom of this materialistic society.  

In addition to these snapshots of the underground music scenes in various cities, the booklet also featured essays by influential music critics and artists in the independent

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30 The fifteen bands include: PK14 from Nanjing (post-punk, poets), 盤古 (Pangu) from Nanchang (the most extreme underground punk band in China), 暗室 (Anshi) from Nanchang (gothic, art-rock), 摊牌 (Qiangbao) from Chendu (death metal and punk), 失眠 (Shimian) from Chendu (Death metal and punk), 子弹打完了 (Zidan Da Wan le) from Xianyang (underground punk, surrealists), 揪水男孩 (Jiaoshui Nanhai) from Shenyang (heavy metal and punk), 雨中族群 (Yuzhong Houqun) from Guangzhou (psychedelic and improvisational), 水地舌头 (Shui de Shetou) from Wulumuqi (punk, avant-garde), 生命之饼 (Shengming Zhi Bing) from Wuhan (performance art), 汇愈者18 (Quanyuzhe 18) from Nantong.

31 Author’s Translation.
music and contemporary art scene. Some authors described the general conditions of the underground culture, others delved into theoretical and critical analysis of Western rock music. There was also one article especially dedicated to Wang Fan’s work. Within these articles, names like John Cage, Gilles Deleuze, and concepts like postmodernity and consumerism were actively discussed by Hao Fang, a well-known Chinese writer and music critic. This was a rarity, as these subjects barely appeared, let alone were analyzed in other music magazines in China at that time. The last article was written by Yan Jun; resembling a manifesto, it expressed his resolution to draw a clear line between new music and the Beijing rock music scene,

It is time that we get together, looking for a new path against the current music industry, against the rotten Beijing rock music scene. We must take advantage of this advancing new age and unite our hot blooded comrades, putting our diehard creative desires, pure music attitudes, and independent critical life views into action.33

In 2002, Yan Jun established an independent label, named after his fanzine, to release China’s independent films, music, literature, and poetry (I discuss Sub Jam further in chapter 5). From this little fanzine, we can clearly see the influence of literature and poetry from the beat generation and Western critical cultural theories on China’s underground music culture. This further suggests that to stay alive, underground music culture not only needs music practices, but also its own cultural and philosophical

32 The critics and artists included Hao Fang, Dong Bingfeng, Hu Lingyun, Jin Mingsun, Zuoxiao Zuzhou, Yan Jun.
33 Author’s translation.
backbone. The music magazine *Free Music*, despite a short life of less than a year, played a critical role in shaping such a backbone (see fig.10).

Free Music was considered the most radical and brave magazine of its kind on the mainland, and was unsurprisingly banned shortly after its release by the state. The magazine, edited by Yang Bo34 (editor, poet, writer, and music critic), released its first issue in October 1999. Yang Bo intended the magazine to present “the most critical words, the most sincere emotions, and the most cutting-edge rock music” (Yang 1999).35 The manifesto-like statement Yang Bo used in the first volume—“music is only a means, freedom is the purpose.”—immediately caught on within the underground music circle and generated fierce discussion of various sensitive topics among its readers. For most readers, this magazine was no longer just about rock music, but the social, cultural and even philosophical meanings behind the music. The magazine generated discussions about the idea of freedom and its relation to music, varied social problems, and existential questions. There were introductions to controversial foreign rock musicians, discussions about sexual repression, interviews with current underground cultural stars, nude pictures, and correspondence between the editor and readers who were alternately angry, lost, and thoughtful. One reader wrote to Yang Bo, suggesting that he should take away the pictures that might be considered pornographic by the state, so that the magazine could continue to be released. Yang Bo put the letter in the magazine, but did not take the advice. Soon after the third issue, *Free Music* was deemed “extremely unhealthy”

34 When he released *Free Music*, 杨波 [Yang Bo] was one of the editors of another music magazine *Music Heaven*. He was a well-known music critic favored by musicians and fans of rock, punk and noise music in China. He is also an avant-garde and experimental writer. His new novel titled 眼中的梁木 released in 2008, was brought to my attention during my interview with the Beijing-based music critic He Xiaoyu.

35 Author’s Translation.
and prohibited by the State Ministry of Culture.\textsuperscript{36} It was said that twenty copies of the fourth issue (2000) were printed but were never released.

*Free Music* was the only magazine in China at that time to introduce cutting edge music that few people had ever heard of or had access to, such as German experimental electronic music, European industrial music, and extreme metal music. This magazine, with only three released issues and one uncirculated, was considered “the second enlightenment” for China’s underground music culture (FBJ 2006).

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\textsuperscript{36} I did not find any official documents or articles on why the magazine was banned in the first place. I was told by a musician that it was reported to the state by a parent who found the magazine in his/her son/daughter’s room, and considered it violent, pornographic and harmful for young people.
Grassroots origins of China’s experimental music are reflected in Sub Jam, Free Music, Wang Fan, and underground music culture. The role Yao Dajunin played and the projects and festivals he has curated suggest another origin, one with an artistic and academic tinge that soon connected with the grassroots terrain.

**Entry Two: Yao Dajunin and the Art of Sound**

Another Entry to China’s sound art is through one person, Yao Dajunin. In the following, I discuss the role of Yao Dajunin in cultivating the first generation of China’s sound artists, and in making a wide range of music genres, notably academic avant-garde and experimental music, free improvisation, and free jazz, available to Mainland listeners through Internet radio.

Yao Dajunin is a Taiwan-born sound artist, art scholar, and web artist. In 1997, Yao founded China Sound Unit. This project focused on listening, documenting, and analyzing urban sounds across the country. Participants were artists, musicians, and students in art or non-art majors, including Li Ruyi, Zhang Anding (aka Zafka), Wang Changcun, Zhong Minjie, Lin Zhiying, and Zhang Liming. They formed independent sound groups in the cities of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mainland China. Their major method were field recordings, also known as phonography.\(^\text{37}\) In Yao Dajunin’s words, China Sound Unit’s field recordings operated with the spirit of anti-materialism, anti-objectivism, and anti-natural soundscape; they were extremely humanistic and focused on urban socio-cultural soundscapes. In an article written about Qing Hai Sound Art Unit, Zhang Anding, a member of the project, reported,

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\(^{37}\) Phonography, the art of field recording, is literally translated as sound writing.
We listen to the sounds made by individuals and crowds when they gather, scatter, and move around…the mixture of Tibetan language, Qinghai Dialect and mandarin…All these sounds generate a sense of unreplicable theatrical feelings… We listen to the resonance and differences among these languages, and listen to the hidden power structure…We experience the relation between the space and sound intensity at high altitude…Sometimes we keep quiet, deciding the distance, behavior, and relationship. Sometimes we ask questions, chat, explain, argue, thus becoming part of the sounds.38

Members of China Sound Unit became the first generation of China’s sound artists, and they continue exploring new possibilities in the sound art field. They took different directions, including making field recordings that investigate relations between sound and the city, laptop music performance using sound editing software (e.g. Max/MSP), sound installation works, sound performance art, and theoretical investigations of sound and listening. The China Sound Unit is an ongoing project, however, its influence is limited to those who have participated in the project, or to the few students who had the chance to take Yao’s courses in China Academy of Art. While China Sound Unit has produced sound artists, Yao Dajunin’s web-based radio “Qianwei Yinyue Wang” [Avant-garde Music Internet Radio] proved to be significant in cultivating a new generation of musicians and a massive audience base for China’s experimental music and sound art.

In 2000, while studying at UC Berkeley’s Art History department, Yao Dajunin began an Internet radio program. Broadcasting for two hours every week from his own

38 Author’s translation.
recording studio, he featured a wide variety of avant-garde and world music. He initiated the program at the invitation of a radio station in Taipei, but also out of his own passion for discovering and sharing new music from around the world. The Internet played an important role not only as a means of content delivery, but also as a medium through which listeners from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Mainland China could talk about music and other related topics. After a few programs, people from the Mainland who had participated in the forum discussions requested that the radio program be made available on the mainland. Yao Dajunin then recorded the program in his own studio, made copies of CDs with marked titles, and mailed them to China from Berkeley. He sent out the CDs for free without any assistance. Soon “Qianwei Yinyue Wang” was broadcasted on radio stations in several cities in China, including Chang Chun, Wu Han, Gui Lin, Tian Jin, Nan Jing, and Chang Sha. The forum itself became an important site for discussions about non-mainstream, experimental, independent, and even unreleased music. It was the first time that mainland listeners were exposed to these types of music with such a high intensity. Yao commented in an interview that listeners from the mainland were more open, receptive, and curious about the music, compared to listeners from Taiwan and Hong Kong. Yao missed the dynamics of the forum in its early stage when people were having sincere and heated discussions about music. Some printed out the forum discussions on paper or converted the website to PDF to view on their cell phones. The important role “Qianwei Yinyue Wang” played was confirmed by Yan Jun, “Qianwei Yinyue Wang” not only provided information, but also suggested a new stage in China’s experimental music and sound art. The
once chaotic and instinctive sonic revolution became more conscientious, the once rebellious artists became more professional. Vocabularies and logics were corrected, artists’ English was getting better. Sound artists’ elite attitudes started to be in conflict with underground noise and experimental musicians (Yan 2006). (Author’s translation)

In 2002, Yao Dajunin was busy preparing for “Sounding Beijing 2003,” an international electronic music festival (discussed below), and thus had less and less time to devote to making “Qianwei Yinyue Wang,” which ceased broadcasting in the same year.

**Entry 3: The Year 2003**

The year 2003 marked an important moment in China’s experimental music and sound art scene. It was the year when the term sound art began to be used publically on the Mainland. 2003 witnessed the first interactions between mainland artists and foreign artists on the same stage, experimental music and new media art, the underground music culture and contemporary art circles.

In this year, the Post-Concrete label, founded by Yao Dajunin in 1999, released a double CD entitled CHINA- The Sonic Avant-Garde, featuring 15 young Chinese artists, all in their twenties, who were active in China’s experimental music and sound art circles (see fig. 11). In the same year, Sounding Beijing, the first international experimental music/sound art festival, curated by Yao Dajunin, successfully took place at Zang Ku/The Loft New Media Art Space in Beijing (see fig.12). By the end of the year, another

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39 The year 2003 was also when the epidemic of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) erupted on Mainland China.
annual experimental music festival 2pi Music Festival was launched in the city of Hangzhou by Li Jianhong. Both Yan Jun and Zbigniew Karkowski, a Polish noise artist, confirmed that after 2003 the scene was established (Karkowski and Yan 2007).

Sounding Beijing 2003 (Nov 1-3) was the first large-scale, international experimental music festival in China. There was no external funding. The festival was made possible by Yao Dajunin and his wife’s personal investments, artists’ self-subsidizations, and help from friends. To guarantee the quality of the festival, Yao invited world-famous experimental musicians and artists, including the noise master Zbigniew Karkowski from Poland, Laetitia Sonami from France, Helmut Schafer from Italy, and Randy Yau from the U.S. From Mainland China, he invited Wang Fan (from Beijing), FM3 (from Beijing), B6 (from Shanghai), 8GG Interactive (from Beijing), Zhong Minjie (from Guangzhou), Ronez (from Guilin), Sulumi (PandaTwin from Beijing), and cy (Ding Dawen from Shanghai). This was the first meeting of Chinese musicians and artists who were interested in exploring the directions of experimental, electronic music and sound art. One month later, The Wire released an article on this festival, reporting on the process of each performance. Sounding Beijing 2003 was one of the milestones in the development of the field of sound art in China and opened a space for interactions among local and foreign sound artists.

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40 These musicians have now become central figures in the Chinese sound art scene.
Fig. 11. The covers of *CHINA -The Sonic Avant-Garde*, 2003, released by Post-Concrete

Fig. 12. Posters of *Sounding Beijing 2003*
On 29 November 2003, immediately after Sounding Beijing 2003, another music festival—2pi Music Festival (changed to 2pi Festival in 2006), curated by Li Jianhong, opened in the city of Hanzhou in Southern China. This later developed into one of the two largest experimental, improvisational music and sound art festivals in China. Li Jianhong, identified by Zbigniew Karkowski as “China’s best noise music artist,” started his noise music band 2pi [the second skin] in 1999, and subsequently opened the independent music label, 2pi Records in 2003. The first 2pi music Festival was only a small-scale local festival that took place over one day, with three local groups and three groups from neighboring Shanghai. Although Li Ruyi, a music critic commented that musicians within the festival were making experimental music in a rock music way, it nevertheless created a space for experimentation, as well as communication among likeminded people with similar listening sensibilities.

After 2003, festivals and concerts flourished, shaping a scene that was no longer completely underground or local. “Internationalization began from then on,” Yan Jun proclaimed (2006). Both Sounding Beijing and the first 2pi music Festival brought together musicians and artists interested in experimental music and sound art and made international collaborations possible by inviting artists from abroad. The festivals introduced cutting edge experimental music and sound art works in the form of booklets, forums, and workshops. Sounding Beijing also popularized the term “sound art” in China.

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41 The six groups of musicians included Aitar, B6, Junkyard from Shanghai, Li Jianghong, 2 Pi, Sic+Lu Dadong+ Zhang Zhen from Hangzhou.
With computers and Internet more accessible to ordinary families and college students in China, come the successors to the “daokou generation,” the “download generation.” Sound artists including Jimu (Jiang Zhuyun), Wang Changcun, and Xu Cheng belong to this generation. They use software to create music and are more interested in sound installations instead of using musical instruments. Yan Jun has described this new generation as “the true pioneers of pure sound and the first genuine sound artists in China” (Yan 2008).

Entry 4: Teeming with Live Festivals and Concerts after 2003

After 2003, Experimental music and sound art festivals and concerts were held annually or monthly. These events allowed sound art and experimental music to be heard by a larger and broader audience beyond the underground music and contemporary art circles. If one has never heard of Yao Dajunin, has no access to the underground music culture, or missed events during the year 2003, one could still enter the field through any one of the festivals, concerts, and venues to be discussed below.

2pi (Music) Festival in Hangzhou

2pi Music Festival was held annually on the last weekend in November from 2003 until 2007 (see fig. 13). The first three 2 Pi Music Festivals (2003-2005) were held at No. 31 bar, and the following two (2006-2007) were moved to Loft 49, No. 12 Warehouse, owned by Common International Cultural Institution. The next four were extended to a two-day festival due to the increasing number of musicians from other cities and countries who were invited to perform. The 4th festival in 2006 was the most reported on and documented, and was also recognized as a watershed for the

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42 Author’s translation
development of China’s experimental music and sound art scene. It was this year that the word *music* was taken away from the title, and it became 2pi Sound Festival, indicating the organizers’ attempt to make sound art. In fact, in previous 2pi Music Festivals, there were already sound artists who did not consider themselves to be musicians. The change of the title could be seen as an adjustment made to better incorporate all participants. It also indicated an increasingly blurred boundary between experimental music and sound art in the scene. This year’s festival had the most performances. The two-day festival was compressed into an eight-hour non-stop show over one day. The night after the festival, some of the musicians met and had a four-hour long discussion reflecting on their own performances, the identity of Chinese experimental musicians, and their future directions. According to an article by music critic Ding An, after four years of development, China’s non-academic new music faced a critical challenge due to its lack of creativity and a need for changes and new blood (Ding 2006). It became imperative for musicians and artists to rethink the nature of sound and redefine their identity as musicians and artists.

The last 2pi festival was held in 2007. In spite of its increasing scale and recognition among sound artists and musicians from abroad, the festival never received any commercial, governmental, organizational, or institutional funding during its five-year run. The festival could only afford room and board for performers. Artists and musicians paid for their own trips. As the only large-scale annual experimental music

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43 Artists in 2pi Festival 2006 were: 1+1+1 (Fu Zhou), Alessandro Bosetti (Germany), Audrey Chen (U.S.A), Ben Houge (Seattle/Shanghai), Chiang Liwei (Tai Bei), Dajuin Yao (Tai Bei), D!O!D!O!D! (Hangzhou), Ji Mu (Hangzhou), Li Jianhong (Hangzhou), Lin Zhiying (Guangzhou/Shen Zhen), livescope (Hangzhou), Ronez (Guilin), Torturing Nurse (Shanghai), Tsai Hsinyuan (Taipei), Wang Changcun (Ha’erbing), Wang Fan (Beijing), Zafka (Beijing), and Zhong Minjie (Guangzhou).
festival in Southern China, the closure of 2pi festival was a big loss for both fans and musicians. But Li Jianhong and Weiwei (another organizer of 2pi Festival, as well as Li’s wife) displayed a positive attitude when I asked them why they did not continue, “Money was a problem but we felt that 2pi festival had done its job in opening up and establishing the scene.”

Fig. 13. Poster of 2pi Music Festival 2006 (left), Poster of 2pi Festival 2007 (right)

**WaterLand Kwanyin in Beijing**

In Beijing, in 2005, Yan Jun, Wu Quan, and the group FM3 initiated WaterLand Kwanyin, an event focusing on experimental, noise, avant-garde, improvisational, and
electronic music. This free event occurred weekly at the 2 Kolegas Bar in a drive-in movie theatre in the Chaoyang District. The events featured spiritual sounds, field recording mixes, noise, video art, and body performance, along with film screenings. In 2008, the schedule was changed to twice a month, and the organizers began to charge admission. With its frequent performances and low standards for participation, WaterLand Kwanyin soon became an important venue for foreign experimental, noise and electronic musicians and sound artists.

From the first WaterLand Kwanyin event on 21 June 2005 until the last show on 19 January 2010, there were 167 events held at the 2 Kolegas Bar. Over the course of five years, WaterLand Kwanyin gradually evolved into a gathering place for artists and musicians. Other than foreign artists, there were fewer new faces joining; people came to the event more as a means of meeting old friends, instead of listening to new sound works. For Yan Jun, this closed sense of community built around WaterLand Kwanyin was a serious problem, an obstacle that stifled creativity and the production of good sound works. By the end of 2009, Yan Jun began looking for new performance spaces and terminated the WaterLand Kwanyin events in January 2010, right before the Chinese New Year. The termination of the Waterland Kwanyin regular performances gave birth to a new project named Sub Jam Monthly Concert at UCCA in 798 Art District.

Sub Jam Monthly Concert at UCCA in Beijing

Sub Jam Monthly Concert at UCCA was held on the last Saturday of every month and included acoustic instruments, small monitor speakers, sound/music game and performance, live video/visual art, etc. The first concert was on 30 January 2010.

44 Website for WaterLand Kwanyin archive: http://www.subjam.org/archives/category/wk
Although the new project was still music-oriented, it differed from the Waterland Kwanyin series at 2 Kolegas Bar in terms of its local and global publicity. Because it was in a gallery it was connected to an art world context. The time of the show changed from 9 p.m. in 2 Kolegas bar to 2 p.m. The new project was also relatively less selective of its audience. There were new groups of visitors who included regular art gallery visitors, foreign artists, tourists, art students, and families who would go to 798 during weekends. The gallery space also provided a better listening environment for sound installation and participatory sound art.

**Mini Midi Experimental Music Festival**

In 2005, four months after the opening of the first WaterLand Kwanyin event, Yan Jun curated another annual festival, the Mini Midi Festival. An extension of WaterLand Kwanyin, it featured experimental, avant-garde, improvisational, noise, and sound art performances. *Mini Midi festival* was part of a larger annual event known as the Midi Festival, the earliest and also largest outdoor rock music festival in China, which began in 2000. The Mini Midi Festival was the experimental stage of Midi Music Festival and offered free admission.

The first three Mini Midi Festivals were held at Beijing Haidian Park. The fourth Mini Midi Festival was a three-day event, May 1-3, 2008. It was held at the drive-in movie theater on the grass in front of 2 Kolegas Bar, as well as inside of the bar. It featured forums, outdoor and indoor performances, lectures, and exhibitions. Mini Midi

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45 Midi Festival was hosted and sponsored by Beijing Midi school of Beijing, a state-approved private school.
46 The first Mini Midi Festival lasted three days (Oct.1-3, 2005) and featured 22 acts; the second one lasted four days (May 1-4, 2006) and featured 23 acts; the third one lasted three days (May 1-3, 2007) and featured 27 acts
did not occur in 2009.\textsuperscript{47} The fifth Mini Midi Festival began in May 2010. This year, however, it was a tour across five cities, including Shanghai, Fuzhou, Quanzhou, Xiamen, Wuhan and Changsha.\textsuperscript{48}

\textbf{Frightened by Dog Live in Tongzhou, Beijing}

“Frightened by Dog Live” was another outdoor music festival in Beijing (see fig. 14). Compared with the Mini Midi Festival and 2pi festival, it was less formal and less strictly experimental. It was organized by a group of anarchist musicians known as Raying Temple (see chapter four for further discussion of the space). They were rock musicians from other provinces, mainly Shandong, living at the Sun village in Tongzhou, an inexpensive area nearly one hour away by subway from the center of the city. One afternoon in the fall of 2004, Li Yangyang (drum), Zhang Zhongshu (vocal/bass), and Xiao Guang (guitar), met and recorded an improvisational CD in Sun Zhuang. They named the group Bei Gou Jing Xia ing [Frightened by Dog], and titled the CD with the same name.

\textsuperscript{47} I asked Yan Jun about this in one of our interviews and he explained that he did not have time that year and was busy with performances overseas.

\textsuperscript{48} Specifically, the Mini Midi 2010 tour was held in three venues, Cao Tang, Mao Livehouse, O Art Center, in Shanghai from May 1\textsuperscript{st} to 4\textsuperscript{th}, at Shao Yuan No.1 bar in the city of Fu Zhou on June 10, at Live Five Number Five coffee shop [Wupai Wuhao] the city of Quanzhou on June 11, at Dreamer House in the city of Xia Men from June 12-13, at the Manufactura’s Studio in the city of Wu Han from July 17 to 22, and it ended up at the city of Changsha in Freedom House and Hu Nan: New Millennium Center for Contemporary Arts from July 24 to 25.

I participated in the Wuhan and Changsha tour of \textit{Mini Midi 2010} and discuss it more in chapter 5.
In 2005 (arguably 2004, see a detailed explanation in note 26), Li Yangyang organized the first Frightened by Dog Live Festival. The idea was as simple as taking their own instruments and devices out in an open area in Sun Zhuang and telling musicians and music fans to come play.\(^{49}\) The festival was free and offered free beer. It featured bands including Mafeisan, 4xfangge, Defect, Xiuchang Guatou, thx, Ju, and Liu Er. The groups were diverse in musical styles such as grunge, punk, hardcore, improvisational noise, post rock, and laptop noise. The poster read “no need of registration, no need of sample, no need of title, no limitation of styles. Anyone who wants to play, just come on time.” The openness of the festival created a rare meeting.

\(^{49}\) As documented on Nojiji website, the first Frightened by Dog Live Festival was held in 2005, but in our interview, Yangyang recalled that the first festival should be in 2004. I further confirmed with him through email about the year, and he said the first festival should be in 2004 instead of 2005.
place for musicians of all levels. These included those who were poor, without any formal musical training, without much experience with instruments, and those who were simply interested in music but did not necessarily know how to play. Other than this poster and a few pictures, little of this festival was documented.\textsuperscript{50} The second Frightened by Dog live was held two/three years later in 2007, with a couple of new faces joining in, Ong (an improvisational/experimental band), Feng Hao, Liu Dongming, and the Adventure of Revenge Park and Circus (post-rock band).\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{50} Yangyang shared some similarities with Li Jianhong in organizing festivals in that they rarely bothered to document the events. For them, making it happen and having fun at the moment is the only thing that matters.

\textsuperscript{51} In our interview, Yangyang said that after the 2005 festival, Sun Zhuang became the (rock) music village in Tongzhou Beijing.
Fig. 15. Posters of Sally Can’t Dance 2008 (above), 2009 (below, left), 2010 (below, right).
Sally Can’t dance/ China Avant-garde Music Festival was established in 2008 and held at the D-22 music club every March (see fig. 15). The first festival, Sally Can’t Dance 2008 (March 1-17, 2008), was curated by Li Tieqiao, an experimental saxophonist, who has since immigrated to Norway. The festival featured experimental music, noise, and free improvisational music, including academic avant-garde musicians, and non-academic/grassroots musicians. Sally Can’t Dance 2009 (March 21-22, 2009) was curated by Zhang Xiaozhou, a music critic. Sally Can’t Dance 2010 (March 27-28, 2010) was curated by Yan Jun (Sub Jam). This Festival was sponsored by D-22 music club and Maybe Mars Record Label, both created and owned by Michael Pettis, a professor of finance at Peking University.

(((Sunday Listening @ 798 ))) in Beijing

Sugar Jar, an Independent Culture Transmission Studio and 150 square foot independent music store located at 798 Art District, was originally a distributor of China’s experimental, noise, and sound art works (see chapter three for further discussion). It soon became an important site for hosting live sound art, experimental music, and poetry reading events. Yang Licai, more commonly known as Lao Yang,

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52 Sugar Jar and its Sunday concerts is where I entered the field. In the summer of 2008, I went to Beijing for the first time to search for my dissertation research subject- China’s avant-garde, experimental music culture. Without any relevant contacts and with little idea of where to go, I roamed the city day after day, trying out my luck in art schools, music clubs, and art districts. After two weeks, quite by accident, in 798 Art District, I discovered Sugar Jar, a tiny store, squeezed in between two large fancy restaurants, and facing a grand contemporary art gallery. It was my third time in 798. Entering Sugar Jar, I saw collections of CDs with titles like Waterland Kwanyin, “Noise is Free” Mini Midi 2008, Sound…Every square meter of the studio was used for something. It had its own bathroom, and was divided into two floors with the upper level as a living space and the lower one as a working space. The stairs leading up to the second floor were designed as shelves, containing handmade cultural products, music works and interesting musical items. A few minutes after I walked in, I met another cultural traveler, Bruno Moynie, an ethnographic filmmaker from France. He had come to China to shoot a documentary on Beijing’s avant-
opened Sugar Jar in June 2003, illegally selling music works made by his musician friends in Beijing in a four square meter room near the west gate of Qinghua University. In October 2005, Lao Yang rented a small space at 798 Art District, and applied for an Industry and Commerce Business License for the studio. As Lao Yang revealed, “since 2006, the money earned through selling independent music works could cover the rent, basic office expenses, and salaries for two of my assistants and myself.” Their salary was very low, around 1000 RMB [158 U.S. dollars] every month. Before 2006, Lao Yang could not survive running the studio. He sold other handmade things to earn money to keep the studio alive and meet his basic needs in Beijing.

Despite the difficulties, Sugar Jar in the 798 Art District left its underground status and became an independent studio, while continuing to promote China’s new music. The public and free event held at Sugar Jar was called (((Sunday Listening @ 798 ))), and was open to experimental/noise musicians and sound artists (see fig. 16). As of June 2010, Sugar Jar moved to Xiao Bao village in Song Zhuang (an artist village in Beijing). Sunday Listening lasted for three years, with a temporary gap after its 42 series at 798. It restarted in September 2010 with the support of Fanhall Center For Arts at Tongzhou Song Zhuang Art Center.

garde youth culture. We immediately decided to team up. I conducted interviews with musicians in Chinese, he shot the scene and shows.

53 Interview with the author, July 2008, at Beijing Sugar Jar. Author’s translation.
Entry 5: Sound Art in Gallery and City space

While music festivals and small concerts are still the major venues for the performance of experimental music and sound art in China, in recent years, exhibition spaces and city space have also been used for sound projects and experimental music performances. This last entry features the “Sound and the City” project in Beijing sponsored by the British Council in 2005. Following, I discuss early sound art exhibitions in other cities limited to the scope of the project that focuses more on events in Beijing.
Sound and The City Project in Beijing

Commissioned by the British Council, Sound and the City took place in Beijing in 2005. The precursor of the project was the mayor of London’s sound city strategy to realize the idea of city regeneration. Its purpose was “to suggest ways we might move from being bored victims of an uncaring anonymity to active co-creators of qualitatively more rewarding sound worlds” (Dixon 11). The Sound and the City project encouraged “local people to think about their personal relationship with the city through sound;” as such it spoke to the general public and intervened in the everyday lives of the contemporary Chinese public. Four British sound artists Peter Cusack, David Toop, Clive Bell, and Brian Eno were invited to explore the sounds of Beijing in March 2005, and then to return in October to create site-specific sound works as a response to what they found. David Toop and Brian Eno created site-specific installation sound work in public parks. Clive Bell made an album *London Listens to Beijing Top Ten* to respond to his discovery of the “local pop music” as something that interacted with and defined the public soundscape. Peter Cusack initiated an online competition calling for submissions of “your favorite sound of Beijing,” which received many creative responses from the public and drew much attention from the media. Sub Jam also released a record titled “Favorite Beijing Sounds” (see fig. 18). However, though the project engaged the public space in Beijing and allowed free and open participation among the citizens, its success depend on the financial supports of the British Council and local officials. Without the British Council, such a large-scale and relatively long-term project in the capital city’s public space would not have been possible.
Sound Art Exhibitions

After 2003, the line between China’s underground music culture and contemporary art has been blurred through the practices of experimental music and sound art. As Chinese contemporary art entered what Gao Minglu calls “the art museum age” at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Chinese contemporary artists who practiced visual, installation and performance art began to bring the element of sound into their art works. 9 Dec. 2000 the artist Li Zhenhua curated Sound in Long Fu Si contemporary art museum, inviting artists Wang Wei, Zhang Hui and Shi Qing.\textsuperscript{54} This was a self-financed exhibition and all the art works contained the element of sound. On 14 July 2001, the artist and curator Li Zhenhua organized another exhibition Sound 2 in Jie Zi Yuan Art Center. In this exhibition, the artist Qiu Zhijie curated the sound installation part, while

\textsuperscript{54} The only document I found during my research about this exhibition Sound is Yan Jun’s article, which only briefly mentioned the exhibition and did not provide detailed descriptions.
Li curated electronic music. In May 2004, at the first Dashanzi International Art Festival (DIAF), Huang Rui curated an exhibition with the theme of sound “Cross-Border Language,” featuring performance art, installations, and video art with the element of sound.

In December 2005, Yao Dajunin curated a large sound art installation exhibition titled “Sound Imagination: A Sound Installation Exhibition,” featuring more than twenty sound art works by students from the New Media Art Department in China Academy of Art (see fig. 18).

Fig. 18. Poster of Sound Imagination: A Sound Installation Exhibition, 2005

In recent years, there have been more and more galleries in cities including Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen, both small and large, that feature sound art installation works. To compile a comprehensive list is not impossible, but that is not the goal of this chapter. The point is to show that after 2003, the line between China’s underground
music culture and contemporary art has been blurred through the practices of experimental music and sound art.

With the above five entries, I outline the field of experimental music and sound art in China as a rhizomatic terrain, that has multiple entryways, both in a conceptual and practical one. To best engage in the field, it is necessary that we be willing to merge, mingle and sometimes get lost in one part of the rhizome and find our way out through another. These five entries are by no means separate. Yao Dajunin’s sound art projects and academic background deterritorialize the terrain of the underground grassroots practices with experimental music. But instead of canceling or competing with one another, the movement of deterritorialization gave rise to another origin, that of public festivals and concerts participated in by artists and underground musicians. The concerts and festivals also witnessed the emergence of internationality and interdisciplinarity in the field. The concerts and festivals after 2003 also made possible new formations of communities, which deterritorialize the community of underground music culture. Such is the dynamic of the field: new origins territorialize, while the existing ones deterritorialize, and reterritorialize; one origin gives rise to another, perishes or transforms to something else that continues to grow and gives birth to new lives. In the following chapter, I analyze the collective affects of the sound art culture in relation to a series of freedom-searching events, to explore socio-political significances of sound art practices.
CHAPTER 3
COLLECTIVE AFFECTS: ANXIETY AND POWERLESSNESS

The senses are not only the basis for the epistemological constitution of reality, but also for its transformation, its subversion in the interest of liberation.

Marcuse “Counter-Revolution and Revolt” 71

You start to act, for 自在 [spontaneous becoming or self-existing]. 自在 is 自由 [Freedom]. 自由 is a human right, but human right is political!
Comrade, you stumble onto the stage of politics in a daze.55
Zuoxiao Zuzhou “Yuan Wang [Scapegoat]” Lyrics

The June 4th Tiananmen incident gave rise to collective anxiety and powerlessness particularly among intellectuals, artists and musicians in China. Instead of alleviating the sense of anxiety and powerlessness, the free market and the increasing commercialized culture, added new dimensions to both affects. As affects, anxiety and powerlessness are simultaneously conceptual, sensual, and biological. Drawing on Kathleen Stewart, “affects are at once abstract and concrete” (2007, 3). I examine anxiety and powerlessness as feelings that always come with their own conceptualization. As Ngai argues, anxiety is “an affect containing its own theory or formative principle” (Ngai, 222). In the performance of artworks discussed below, anxiety and powerlessness, while revealed as sensations, are also conceptual tools in framing the artworks.

In this chapter I examine a series of events related to human rights, social justice, global capitalism, and the art market in China. In doing so, it draws out dimensions of anxiety and powerlessness that characterize the sound art culture’s “affective bearing or

55 Author’s translation from the Chinese lyrics written by Zuoxiao Zuzhou. The Chinese text: 你已经行动，为了自在，自在是自由，自由是人权，可人权是政治！ 同志，你糊里糊涂地走上了政治的舞台.
orientation, or ‘set toward the world’” (Ngai 2005, 29). I investigate how anxiety and powerlessness accompany, shape—and are shaped—by the ways in which individuals critically engage with the social through artistic practice. I further argue that various freedom-searching events involving artists and musicians in the sound art culture intensify collective anxiety and powerlessness, even while achieving socio-political effects.

The freedom-searching events discussed in this chapter could be divided into three kinds, depending on how individual artists perceive the function of music and art, what modalities of freedom they regard as the more urgent and possible, and how individuals cope with their felt-anxiety and powerlessness. For Lao Yang, noise and experimental music make up a social weapon, one whose sonic characteristics symbolize a resistance to the political power of the state. He fought for social justice and human rights through his own performance art practice and through his direct participation in a series of social activism events, which ultimately led to the destruction of his studio Sugar Jar in the 798 Art District.

In the contemporary art gallery UCCA, also located in 798, experimental musicians and artists organized an art event titled “You Have No Place to Escape—A Gathering of Losers.” The event was to disturb the order of the market-like art museums and criticize capitalism in China. At the same time, the art event expressed the impossibility of breaking free from capitalism and consumerism, which intensified affects of anxiety and powerlessness.
These freedom-searching events achieved both desirable and undesirable effects. While attracting attention and inspiring discussions about democracy and human rights among people in China and abroad, Lao Yang’s freedom-searching acts led to a temporary loss of his individual freedom and a permanent loss of the space he opened to support China’s underground and independent sound art culture. UCCA also terminated Sub Jam’s concert series in the gallery after the last art event. Besides these two kinds of freedom-searching events, I also propose another kind, which does not directly challenge the state, or the free market, but individual listener’s sensing habits.

While my discussion of the connection between freedom and affects of anxiety and powerlessness emerges from the ethnographic material, Søren Kierkegaard’s discussion of anxiety and freedom and Fredric Jameson’s discussion of anxiety as a kind of expectation affect provide conceptual frames that help develop the relation between these terms.

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Søren Kierkegaard writes, “Anxiety is freedom’s actuality as the possibility of possibility” (1981). This statement should not be simplified as Kierkegaard’s proposal of a consequential or causal relationship between freedom and anxiety. Rather, he attempts to draw a complex link between the two. He captures what is shared by both concepts—possibility and ambiguity. The actuality of freedom is still an ambiguity; the ambiguity of freedom’s actuality gives us anxiety. Moreover, in anxiety we become “un-free,” but we discover freedom in anxiety nonetheless (Grøn 2008; Kierkegaard 1981). The situation in which anxiety arises can be ambiguous. Furthermore, as Kierkegaard argues, anxiety is without an object (Grøn 2008). The
ambiguity of anxiety is later explored through its temporality and spatiality (Bloch 1995; Heidegger; Jameson 1971; Ngai 2005).

According to Fredric Jameson, anxiety is the kind of “expectation affect” that “aims less at some specific object as the fetish of their desire, than at the very configuration of the world in general or (what amounts to the same thing) at the future disposition or constitution of the self” (Jameson 1974, 127). One could feel anxious without clearly knowing what and why. Expectation affects correspond to what Ngai calls meta-feelings, “in which one feels confused about what one is feeling” (Ngai 14). For Ngai, meta-feelings, as “a state of feeling vaguely ‘unsettled’ or ‘confused’,’” are bewilderment in an affective sense rather than an epistemological one (14). While Jameson identifies anxiety as future-oriented, Ngai suggests anxiety emerges from a spatial displacement, related to spatial terms like “fleeing, turning, falling, and sinking” (215).

If we agree with Kierkegaard’s formula, we recognize anxiety as an almost universally and existentially doomed affect everyone with any desire for freedom would experience (1981). However, while the ambiguity of freedom renders itself translatable into different things in different social-cultural-historical milieus, this kind of universal affect also has its particular contextual manifestations and significance. Therefore, in this chapter, I examine anxiety and its related affect of powerlessness in the context of China’s sound art culture in the post-Tiananmen era.

In the following, I first discuss the existence of both affects—anxiety and powerlessness—in China since the post-revolutionary era in the 1970s as reflected in
literature, visual arts, and later musical works. Then I discuss both affects in the current sound art culture through a series of what I call freedom-searching events, including the destruction of Lao Yang’s studio Sugar Jar and an art event in UCCA curated by Sub Jam. In the last section, I propose the political possibility of the senses, and I argue that freedom-searching acts not only include the two kinds discussed, but also art practices that challenge everyday sensual perceptions and that calls for “sensing beyond security” (Manning 2007; Mattin 2009).

Anxiety and Powerlessness

Anxiety and powerlessness are affects detectable in contemporary Chinese literature, visual arts, and music concerning the sensual condition of everyday life in China after the Cultural Revolution. The professor of modern Chinese studies Tang Xiaobing analyzes of novels that articulate everyday life in post-revolutionary time:

When everyday life is affirmed and accepted as the new hegemony, when commodification arrives to put a price tag on human relations and even on private sentiments, participatory communal action may offer itself as an oppositional discourse and expose a vacuity underlying the myriad of commodity forms. The persistent nostalgia for Mao and his era in late twentieth-century China is a good sign of the collective anxiety that the market economy has given rise to (Tang 2000,128).

For those born in the late 1970s and 1980s and even later, Mao’s time appears relatively remote, and the kind of nostalgia for a communal life may also sound somewhat abstract. However, consumerism has persisted as a strong element shaping
urban dwellers’ everyday life up until today. As Tang argues, while being a source of such collective anxiety, consumerism nonetheless functions to “contain and dissolve the anxiety of everyday life” and to “translate collective concerns into consumer desire” (129). In addition, in the post-Tiananmen era, June 4th brought a new dimension to collective anxiety and powerlessness not felt before. These affects could be felt in art works made in the 1990s.

In Chinese contemporary visual arts, Cynical Realism, which emerged after the Tiananmen incident, expressed a disillusioned view of socialist idealism with a kind of “roguish humor” (Li 1992, 162). It expressed “a collective psychological state of loss and apathy” in everyday mundane life in the post-Tiananmen era (Li 1992). Through their artworks, artists of Cynical Realism presented a distanced, skeptical, and somewhat nihilistic sensibility towards social and political issues. Cynical Realism has achieved an unpredicted market success in the global art market; its sense of skepticism has been passed down and shared among avant-garde and experimental artists in China. As Ngai points out, anxiety has been useful as a critical framing device in Western intellectual history to immediately establish a skeptical or critical stance (213). This is arguably the case in Chinese intellectual and avant-garde practices in varied cultural domains. Moreover, the cynical attitude and hesitance in taking a stance in political and social issues, while showing one’s criticality, also suggests an impotency to take action, further revealing a collective feeling of powerlessness in the post-Tiananmen era.

Early Chinese rock music is another direct expression of a collective anxiety and powerlessness felt before and after the June 4th incident (see Chapter one and two). Cui
Jian’s widely known rock song “Having Nothing” well captured a feeling of impoverishment surrounding an individual’s material and spiritual life in post-revolutionary China. While rock music was soon co-opted by the music industry, China’s underground and experimental music practice continues early rock music’s revolutionary spirit to some extent. Some experimental musicians still carry the sense of nationalism and patriotism, or the very opposite—hatred and resistance to the state—from early rock music culture.\(^{56}\)

In recent years, another musician artist named Zuoxiao Zuzhou caught the public’s attention, although he was already long-established in the underground music cultural a long time ago. He was also a founding member of the Beijing East Village art collective, active in performance art and contemporary art scenes. In recent years, he has started to collaborate with the performance artist and social activist Ai Weiwei. Zuoxiao Zuzou writes lyrics that address and criticize social issues in a penetrating yet humorous way. His lyrics express a kind of powerlessness felt among ordinary Chinese citizens reminiscent of Cynical Realism. In “A walk in the Park,” he sings, “A walk in the park, there will be no bother, since we are not the decision-makers. The government is the chief dealer. Oh, if they don’t exist, how can I burst into laughter?” In “Beijing Pictorial,” we hear, “when my dream is about to perish, I seem to hear someone whisper to me about the real relation between dream and money…” The song repeats on the line “Uncles, uncles, and brothers! Could you realize my dream?” However, compared with Cynical Criticism, Zuoxiao Zuzhou’s works carries a much less pessimistic and distanced

\(^{56}\) See more discussions on China’s early rock music by Nimrod Baranovitch in *China’s New Voices*, Jeroen de Kloet in *China with a Cut: Globalization, Urban Youth and Popular Music*, Andrew F. Jones in *Like a Knife, Ideology and Genre in Contemporary Chinese Popular Music*. 
attitude. The musician takes a clear stance of being part of the masses and the ordinary. He expresses feelings of powerlessness and anxiety towards his social surroundings and his own living condition. More importantly he shows a willingness to cope with these situations.

On the experimental end of underground music practice, although there are no lyrics to express easily identifiable feelings and sentiments, the affects of anxiety and powerlessness play a part in the making or the performance of the actual work. For example, In Yan Jun’s feedback noise performance, extremely low or high frequency sounds could cause anxiety as an immediate physical reaction. Yan Jun revealed in an interview that he chooses to make and listen to sounds that cause him discomfort and reduce him to a state of powerlessness where there is no anchor or sense of familiarity to fall back on. Likewise, performance sound artist Li Zenghui’s live vocal noise performances can always generate an agitated feeling among audiences, a feeling not strong enough to reach the intensity of catharsis, but mildly disturbing and unsettling. In experimental music and sound art works, affects often may not necessarily become the subject of expression in the sound art works, but they register in the creative process of bringing the sonic chaos into a certain form. For instance, according to Wang Fan, his second experimental music album, *Five Elements*, was made to re-balance himself when he was in a state of extreme anxiety. The work itself sounds soothing and spiritually comforting.

Finally, it is also worth pointing out that in the post-Tiananmen era, the “West” plays multiple roles in affects of anxiety and powerlessness, which are no less important
than the state. From the beginning, experimental musicians and sound artists were open to Western influences and had frequent collaborations with foreign musicians, artists, and foreign media. For people like Lao Yang, Western media and audiences, especially social activists, constitute an important force supporting China as a “democratic” country. Sound artists like Yan Jun and Lin Chi-Wei coincide with international avant-garde artists (e.g. Dada, International Situationists and Fluxus artists) who considered it urgent to fight against capitalism and consumerism. Mixed with these two kinds of artists are people like Wang Fan and Raying Temple’s musicians (see discussion in Chapter four), who are more concerned with music works and spirituality, and are connected to people from the West interested in Chinese traditional aesthetics, philosophy, and instruments (particularly Gu Qin). Therefore, the “West,” as a broad and abstract term or symbol, functions both as a solution and as source of post-Tiananmen’s anxiety and powerlessness.

“Sugar Jar” and Lao Yang

The Sugar Jar studio was destroyed in April 2010. Pictures of Lao Yang protesting outside of Sugar Jar were posted online. Two months later, when I visited the studio in June 2010, the space was already abandoned. It seemed almost as if nothing had happened; the protesting banners and piles of ruins recorded in online pictures were nowhere to be found. Tourists streamed into the restaurant next door and contemporary art galleries across the street. When it was intact, Sugar Jar was too tiny and unpolished to draw immediate attention. Its destruction and ruin also caused little disturbance among passersby, especially since the demolition and construction of houses and streets have
become normal and prevalent in Beijing in recent decades. The official explanation for Sugar Jar’s destruction was its lease had expired, which ran from October 2005 to April 2010.

The name Sugar Jar was coined by Lao Yang, and refers to a sugar jar his family owned when he was young. Every summer the factory his father worked in used cane sugar as a summer subsidy for its workers. At that time, his family was too poor to get him any snack food, and sugar became the source of Lao Yang’s summer snack. Sugar Jar is also the name of a very sweet melon, specially produced in his hometown Dalian. Inside of the studio Sugar Jar there used to be a logo banner that read “Our life is sweeter than honey.” By supporting handmade products, second hand commodity, and independent culture, Sugar Jar announces a resistance to mainstream lifestyles and dominant social values while expressing a positive living attitude despite the bitterness of material life.

Sugar Jar was a reflection of the independent culture it supported—handmade, economic, environmentally friendly, low cost, but hip and artsy. Sugar Jar was also Lao Yang’s self-invention—it condensed the sweetness of his life out of all the bitterness he experienced and witnessed, and it embodied the emotional connection he has developed with the sound art culture. He revealed in our interview why he opened the studio, “It was not an easy process for me to find these people and this kind of music.”

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57 Explanations of the name sugar jar were provided by Lao Yang in an interview with the author in Sugar Jar in July 2008.
58 He refers to independent rock, folk, and noise music.
have access to these resources, I hope through my work, more people could know them, and know their independent spirit and artistic work." 

For Lao Yang, music, and later contemporary art is essentially a social tool to fight for social justice and to overcome individual powerlessness. In our interviews, Lao Yang has expressed more than once his desire to feel powerful, especially every time when he decided to make changes in either his way of life or his choice of music. Sugar Jar, from its establishment, through its development and finally to its destruction is a result of Lao Yang’s search for freedom and for self-empowerment. Freedom for Lao Yang was related to human rights, social justice, and democracy. From a series of events to be narrated below, which ultimately led to the destruction of Sugar Jar, I try to examine dimensions of anxiety and powerlessness that underpinned Lao Yang’s acts. I argue that Lao Yang’s acts refrain the tank man event—a powerless individual confronting the machine of the state. Furthermore, his heroic acts, that is, freedom-searching acts, in my opinion, intensify rather than alleviate his anxiety and maybe also powerlessness.

**Lao Yang and Wenchuan Earthquake Investigation**

In recent years, Lao Yang has become increasingly active in social movements. In 2008, he participated in a movement led by the artist Ai Weiwei in collecting names of

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59 Interview with the author, July 2008, at Beijing Sugar Jar. Author’s translation.
victim students in Wenchuan earthquake, which had occurred in Sichuan province. Ai Weiwei visited Wenchuan after the earthquake and noticed that only school buildings had collapsed, whereas the adjacent structures were left intact, raising suspicions of corruption during the construction. The state government only published the number of victims in the earthquake but not their names. Therefore, Ai recruited a group of 50 volunteers to compile the names of student victims in this earthquake. During the investigation, as Ai Weiwei wrote in his blog, around 20 volunteers were harassed and detained in custody by local police. In August, Ai Weiwei, Lao Yang and a few other volunteers arrived in Sichuan’s capital, Chengdu, to support Tan Zuoren, an intellectual who had been arrested and charged with “inciting subversion of state power” for demanding a public investigation of the collapsed schools in Wenchuan. Ai Weiwei was attacked and injured by plainclothes policemen in his hotel. Lao Yang was held in custody in a local police office. Meanwhile, Tan Zuoren was sentenced to five years in prison.

**Lao Yang and Yang Jia**

On December 5, 2008, Lao Yang began a performance series lasting roughly a month. It was also his personal protest. For that month, he went through his daily routine while holding a card with the bold phrase “I am Yang Jia.” He held this card on buses, the MRT, taxis, supermarkets, in the 798 Art District, or while attending events in Song Zhuang⁶⁰ or SoHo Modern city (see fig. 19).

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⁶⁰ Song Zhuang is an artist village in Tongzhou district, formed initially among young painters, poets, and performance artists who came to Beijing from other provinces.
Fig. 19. Lao Yang on the Subway, holding the board, written “I am Yang Jia.” Courtesy of Lao Yang

Yang Jia was from Beijing. He went to Shanghai with his mother for sightseeing on October 5, 2007 during the national holiday. He rented a bicycle in Shanghai, but was mistakenly arrested by local policemen for bicycle theft. After the investigation, the policemen were convinced that Yang Jia did not steal the bicycle, and therefore released him. No further details about his custody were revealed, but it was said that Yang Jia was abused badly during the six hours while he was in custody. On July 1, 2008 he went to the police office building in Shanghai’s Zhabei district. Armed with a knife, Yang Jia killed six policemen and injured four. As Yang Jia was arrested on the same day, his

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61 I narrate Yang Jia’s case from what Lao Yang has written, since there were different versions regarding the case, the official one, and narratives from different media and also online forums. How Lao Yang interpreted this case affected how he decided to react.
mother was also detained and later was kept in a mental hospital for treatments. Yang Jia was charged with a death sentence on November 21, 2007. In Lao Yang’s blog, he wrote, “The case of Yang Jia was an important turning point in my life. His death brought me a great sense of crisis. I lost my last trust and confidence in this society, completely losing a sense of security.”

He also wrote about his performance in his blog:

My card holding performance was a personal expression when I was desperate. Holding the card is to protest. It is also a gesture of resolute separation. I have no place to escape to, so I must find a simple and direct behavior to cut myself off from the powerless and obedient everyday public life. It is to prove that I am still alive, and I am still able to react to violence. I am not becoming a living dead body bullied by the society.

Lao Yang discussed his performance as part of his “sound measurement” series, which intend to measure public discourse and the power relations in public space through a series of performative tools and performance acts.

**Lao Yang and Liu Xiaobo**

In the same year, on December 25, Lao Yang went to the police office, asking to go to prison with Liu Xiaobo (the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner). Liu Xiaobo drafted Charter 08, which demanded rights to free speech, open elections and the implementation of the rule of law in China. Lao Yang was among those who had signed Charter 08. The Charter 08 along with other acts Liu organized and participated landed him in prison for

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11 years under the charge of “inciting subversion of state power.” On the day when the court announced Liu Xiaobo’s charge, Lao Yang, who had been waiting outside of the court, went to the police department to give himself up. As Lao Yang described, the police ignored his request, and a few plainclothes officials from the National Security Bureau forced him to leave. After this event, Lao Yang was under the surveillance of the police department and the National Security Bureau, and his studio Sugar Jar was subjected to numerous acts of harassments. Beginning in early 2009, the 798 art district realty department tried to force Lao Yang to move out through indirect means such as occasionally cutting off the water and electric supply to Sugar Jar.

Lao Yang and Hu Jia

In July 2009, Lao Yang organized a screening event at Sugar Jar. It was an independent documentary titled *Prisoner in the Free City* about the Chinese social activist and dissident, Hu Jia. Hu Jia is the director of June 4th Heritage Cultural Association and is active in the Chinese democracy movement, the Chinese environmental movement, and HIV/AIDS movement. He was often placed under house arrest by the National Security Bureau, and was sentenced to three and a half years in prison in April 2008 under the charge of “inciting subversion of state power.” But very few people knew about Hu Jia’s situation or that something called a house arrest even exist in China. A few days before the screening event, individuals from the police office, the National Security Bureau as well as the Seven Stars Electronic Group realty department talked to Lao Yang and asked him to cancel the screening event. He refused

and insisted on screening the documentary, which was secretly made by Hu Jia and his wife Zeng Jinyan, documenting the process of his house arrest in Beijing.\textsuperscript{64}

After the screening day, electricity was cut to Sugar Jar. Lao Yang wrote about the whole process of negotiating with the realty department and audio recorded his conversations with the realty manager and published his recording online.\textsuperscript{65} A constant answer he was given was that some higher official asked the Seven Stars Electronic Group to stop supplying electricity to Sugar Jar. Lao Yang refused to move out and borrowed a generator from Wu Yuren, a friend and fellow artist who also had a studio in 798. On May 24, 2010, a few unknown social youths robbed the generator installed outside of Sugar Jar. Lao Yang, together with the artist Wu Yuren, went to the police station to report the case, but were both arrested under the charge of illegal graffiti. While Wu Yuren got criminal detention under the charge of offending policemen, Lao Yang was held in custody for an additional ten more days. When he was released and returned to Sugar Jar, he saw his studio was in disarray. His computer had been smashed, and most of the files, documents, books, posters and CDs were gone. Those that remained were destroyed into fragments. Lao Yang started protesting by living outside of the ruins of the studio, and his artist friends came visiting and supporting him (see fig. 20). His protest lasted five days and eventually Lao Yang moved to a friend’s place in Song Zhuang in Tongzhou district.

\textsuperscript{64} http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2zvJItBCN8&feature=fvw
\textsuperscript{65} http://www.douban.com/group/topic/10134758/
Fig. 20. Inside of Sugar Jar before its destruction (upper left), Shelves and doors thrown outside (upper right), Lao Yang standing outside, showing things destroyed (lower left); Lao Yang protesting outside of Sugar Jar (lower right).

**Lao Yang’s Freedom-Searching Acts and His Relation to the Sound Art Culture**

Lao Yang is especially sensitive to social injustice. His connection to the independent music culture was not primarily because of his love for the kind of music, but his sympathy with those musicians’ rebellious and independent spirits, as well as their socially marginalized identities. Lao Yang’s feeling of anxiety and powerlessness accumulated not only from his own experience, but also from that of others’. For
example, he moved to Beijing to sell independent music and live the kind of life those musicians live; he wanted to go to prison when Liu Xiaobo was arrested; he carried the board written “I am Yang Jia” in public places in Beijing for days. To speak for those social victims, he actively sought to become one.

Music is one source with which Lao Yang combats with his feeling of powerlessness. As he said in our interview, in the 1980s, when communist revolutionary songs were no longer powerful for him, he found hope in Hong Kong popular music, which was later replaced by mainland rock music which he found to be a stronger expression. When he encountered experimental music, he felt an intense energy never felt before, which gave him hope and power to live. The feeling of powerlessness, either socially or existentially, caused anxiety for him. It is even likely that it was the feeling of powerlessness that beckoned all the desirable and undesirable bitterness that somehow spurred him and gave him a sense of significance.

Lao Yang’s behaviors, many of which were framed as art, risked his own imprisonment, including openly supporting politically sensitive individuals and publicly screening state-censored documentaries. These acts suggested a sense of tragic heroism, or hero as sacrifice—dying and suffering for the others. Such tragic sense of sacrifice and heroism, when situated in a social milieu dominated with consumerism and opportunism in the post-Tiananmen era, paradoxically enhanced his feeling of powerlessness and anxiety.

What was sound art to Lao Yang? And how was Lao Yang related to the sound art culture? First, as I mentioned, he was attracted to people who make independent and
experimental music and to the kind of independent and underground lifestyle. Similar to many non-academic and non-official musicians and artists, Lao Yang does not have esteemed educational backgrounds or a wealthy family. These musicians, artists and Lao Yang share similar ideals: to live an authentic and free life, and to prioritize spiritual growth more than material richness. In addition, they are also the first generation to benefit from the use of Internet and the development of new technologies at low cost on Mainland China.

Secondly, for Lao Yang, the sonic disharmony in experimental music symbolized a weapon to disrupt the state controlled and regulated social order. As a listener, he found an outlet for his anxiety, powerlessness, and anger in the harsh noise and chaotic sounds. As a social activist, he transferred the transgressiveness of the sonic from its material level to the social level. The weapon of the sonic became especially powerful when China’s sound art developed a global connection that included musicians exchanging music through the Internet and foreign artists and musicians touring in China (for more see chapter 2). Moreover, the sound art culture connected not only with underground music cultures globally, but also the contemporary art world. Contemporary art in China, as a hot spot for international art dealers and the global art market, functions as a protective umbrella for native artists’ bold expressions that are politically sensitive or morally challenging. Of course, these two factors are still not enough to thoroughly address Lao Yang’s connection to the sound art culture; they nonetheless are important elements animating the relationship.
In recent years, however, Lao Yang’s connection to sound art culture gradually waned. I met him in 2009 during my second visit in Beijing at 2 Kolegas Bar. He was still carrying artists’ CDs to music shows and selling them to audiences at venue entrances. But he told me that he was losing interest in just experimental music and sound art. Although he listened to experimental music and sound art with passion and patience, the transgressiveness and independent value in the noise and sound on the social level first attracted him, but later disappointed him. It seems that he has gradually come to feel there is a difference in perceiving the function and value of music and arts between his own and many Chinese sound artists’. Lao Yang’s own performative acts show his perception of arts as essentially a social tool.

I asked a few musicians and artists their opinions of Lao Yang. Besides sympathy, they could not see themselves doing what Lao Yang did. Yan Jun did not have positive things to say about Lao Yang’s actions, and was doubtful about this kind of heroic behavior. Yan Jun commented with reservation, “What he is interested in is not music or sound art.” Li Jianhong responded when I asked him about Lao Yang, “just consider him as businessman who sells music works.” Sensing his unwillingness to continue the discussion, I did not insist on asking Li for further explanation. I made my own interpretations. Calling Lao Yang a “businessman” might be Li’s way of downplaying all the political issues related to Lao Yang that Li was not interested in talking about, or he was reluctant to tell an outsider researcher. In fact, Li Jianhong is representative of many musicians and artists in the sound art culture who refrain from making or participating in political sensitive events. Rather, they are interested in
making “good” sound art works. However, what follows suggests that making “good” sound art works is arguably an alternative mode of social intervention, or rather it offers different kinds of freedom-searching practices.

“You Have No Place to Escape—A Gathering of Losers”

On December 25, 2010, Sub Jam finished its collaboration with UCCA with the last Sub UCCA Jam concert (see fig. 21). It is titled “You Have No Place to Escape—A Gathering of Losers.” In his email to Sub Jam subscribers, Yan Jun wrote in English, “no specific performance area and no definition of performer or audience… it's an action to feel the failure from the time of supermarket, of simulacra of freedom.... Let’s face the tourist-audience at the unconcerned space again.” In the Chinese version in the same email, he wrote more:

UCCA is a supermarket. China is a supermarket. All our acts and performances become commodities displayed on the racks of this supermarket. No one can escape. There are more and more exhibitions, designs, shows, information explosion, more and more choices. We know all kinds of things superficially, and we could even create idols of political dissidence. Compared to ten years ago, now lack becomes surfeit. Passion and concentration disappears. Public idols think for us and express for us. We are so smart, but also so powerless.67

For artists and musicians, the last Sub UCCA Jam concert was a success. Lao Yang also participated in the concert (see fig. 22). He kept repeating verbally, “the wolf

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66 See a video clip taken during the concert on youtube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVW4WYO8zv0
67 Author’s translation.
is coming,” throughout the concert. For UCCA, on the contrary, the concert was a total disaster. From an email the manager at the service desk sent to her boss, one could tell that UCCA was disturbed by this concert.

One artist led visitors with their eyes covered running in the exhibition hall, disturbing other tourists. A musician after his saxophone performance crawled to our coffee shop, almost tearing down our curtains. One person broke into one of our charged exhibition area and told visitors that the wolf is coming. Someone splashed a bucket of fish onto our floor, and prevented us from cleaning. The noises are too loud, severely interrupting activities in other sections.\textsuperscript{68}

\textsuperscript{68} Author’s translation.
Fig. 21. Playing Saxophone at the Sub UCCA Jam concert “You Have No Place to Escape—A Gathering of Losers.” Li Tieqiao played prepared saxophone (white case); Li Zenghui played alto saxophone facing against the wall; Wang Ziheng played soprano saxophone.
Fig. 22. Lao Yang did his sound performance. On the floor in front of him were small live goldfish. The goldfish was a separate piece from Lao Yang’s. Audiences were supposed to listen to sounds from the tails of the goldfish hitting on the floor.

Collaborating with UCCA was already becoming disappointing for Yan Jun. It did not take long for him to realize that UCCA offered their gallery space for Sub Jam concerts only to increase the comprehensiveness of their contemporary art collections. “They do not care about sound art itself, and did not want to spend time discussing how to make the concert better,” Yan Jun complained in our interview. He continued, “It is a ‘cold’ space.” Ultimately, 798 Art District, albeit still promoted as the symbol of freedom of artistic expression in Beijing, had become neither a place habitable for Sugar Jar, nor a performance space for the Sub Jam sound series.
This last concert embodied a disruptive gesture of Dadaism, the playful and critical nature of Fluxus and Happenings, and the openness of participatory art. Unlike many emotionally stressful and physically painful performance art practices, events like this one had a light and joyful atmosphere; for example, some artists ran with visitors with their eyes covered, some played with funny looking self-made instruments, and some poured a bucket of goldfish onto the gallery floor. The whole event was also a collective act among musicians, artists and audience. However, the playfulness of the performance was a soft kind of violence. It confronted rules of the gallery space in a way intrusive enough to irritate the staff, managers and even visitors, but not enough to cause official policing.

Moreover, its expressiveness and criticality had a pedagogical dimension. “The wolf is coming” (or to “cry wolf” in English) was a message Lao Yang communicated to visitors through his performative act. “The wolf is coming” is a children’s story known to everyone in China. It teaches young kids not to tell lies. Otherwise, one loses the trust of the others even when one speaks of the truth. While repeating “the wolf is coming,” as I interpret, Lao Yang may express his frustration of facing lies everywhere—everyone is telling lies and there is no truth. Or he may use “the wolf” to refer to all kinds of evil forces in the Chinese society. Although the original story is a moral one, in this art event, it did not teach a moral lesson, but a critical attitude. The whole concert, as seen from Yan Jun’s description, is a critical act challenging the capitalist way of managing arts, as well as consumerism in China. While situated in one of the largest contemporary art galleries, this art event with its critical tone carried a mood of elitism common with
international avant-garde art movements. This kind of elitism is different from that of the official artists and intellectuals who could directly influence the mass culture through means of cultural policies or formal education. This elitism is grassroots-based; its influence could only start from the bottom of the social class and move upwards. It is mixed with a sense of powerlessness, clearly expressed in the title of the concert—“You Have No Place to Escape—A Gathering of Losers”—as well as in Yan Jun’s narrative.

A feeling of powerlessness prevailed throughout the whole event—they were ridiculing and fighting against capitalism and the art market, which the artists and musicians also feed on. Their revolutionary acts and their warnings against the supermarket way of managing contemporary art when encapsulated in the gallery space became one of the art commodities and part of the spectacle. The distance between their intellectual consciousness and their actual capacity to make changes contributed to the collective anxiety and powerlessness. With the difficulty of accessing most gallery or museum spaces in China, these non-academic and non-official artists and musicians, however smart and talented, have fewer chances to do what foreign avant-garde artists could do in challenging the art world and society. It is rare to have a Sub Jam concert series in UCCA, but the last concert signified the end of their collaboration.

Anger towards social injustice and anxieties of living in Beijing is shared among these musicians and artists. However, most of them showed less confidence as well as interest in fighting for a Western style of democracy. They doubt a capitalist democracy would eventually bring what it has promised, nor do they have obvious revolutionary agendas. Instead, they are mostly only self-interested. The artist activist Zhang
Xianbing once suggested to Yan Jun during a public forum: “You are a talented and smart artist, but I hope you use these virtues in helping with social issues. Do something for the society instead of only focusing on your own sound art.” Zhang Xianbing’s suggestion, as well as Lao Yang’s gradual departure from the sound art scene, suggests different perceptions of politics and the assumed responsibilities of contemporary artists in China.

The increasing incongruity between Lao Yang and experimental musicians could also be seen in the ways in which they dealt with their powerlessness. In Lao Yang’s case, the sense of powerlessness did not reduce him to a pessimist or escapist. Rather, it fueled Lao Yang’s desire of becoming stronger in order to fight for social justice and democracy. Through Lao Yang’s actions, we sense his hope for a “better” society. In contrast, the kind of powerlessness some musicians and artists felt was more hope-less, which partially explained the feeling of defeatism. Their sense of powerlessness was the source of an incurable existential anxiety, both sensual and intellectual. While Lao Yang’s feeling of powerlessness was as sharp as a knife that spurred his action, these artists and musicians’ feelings of powerlessness were ambiguous and objectless.

Anxiety and powerlessness are kinds of affects that register in the beginning or during the process of making art and music works, but they do not necessarily become what the works express or signify. These affects are usually, as Brain Massumi points out, “unqualified” and “not ownable or recognizable and [are] thus resistant to critique” (28). However, these affective intensities stay detectable on discursive and performative levels—in dialogues, writings, social interactions, objects, (un)conscious acts, and social
effects (Massumi 2002; Ngai 2005). Therefore, in my above narration of freedom-searching events, I focus on moods and feelings, rather than on the objectivity of the events. It is not my primary concern how closely the memory of events is to what actually happened. I believe that how events are personally felt and understood shapes how they will be remembered and retold; thus they can manifest affects while revealing information. Finally, in affects like anxiety and powerlessness, there is “no necessary progressivism” or “essential defensive resistance” (Highmore 2010a, 135). Rather, the sensible has a political productivity that redefines the meaning of the political (Highmore 2010a, Rancière 2004).

**Political Possibility**

The political is an unavoidable question to consider when we deal with affects on a social level. If Lao Yang’s activism is seen as directly political, how would we classify musicians like Li Jianhong who engages the social by making “good” experimental music and art works? I propose that the political productivity of certain sound art practices lies in their potential to redefine what counts as political significance.

As Ben Highmore proposes, politics is “a form of experiential pedagogy, of constantly submitting your sensorium to new sensual worlds that sit uncomfortably within your ethos” (Highmore 2010a, 135). Drawing on this definition, I argue that the political significance of sound art practice could go further in its oppositional stance to the state, capitalism or consumerism. Rather, its productivity lies on a sensorial, mundane and everyday level.
Sound art requires a kind of listening, breaking its own habitual and social training. This is listening “beyond security,” a phrase used by Erin Manning who describes security as essential to the sovereign politics of the nation-state (Manning 2007). “Sensing beyond security” is necessary because “a free body is not a secured body. Liberty, politics, bodies have no pre-established form” (Manning 159). Similarly, Mattin says that making experimental music and listening to it invites “fragile moments” (Mattin 20).\(^6\) Sound artists, especially those making improvisational and experimental sound works, should look for insecure situations. In his research on political connotations of improvised music (referring to free jazz, noise and experimental music) Mattin says that, “to be open, receptive and exposed to the dangers of making improvised music, means exposing yourself to unwanted situations that could break the foundations of your own security” (Mattin 20). To improvise and to experiment with sounds is encouraged and recommended, not only because it is sensually challenging and invigorating (i.e. anxiety and fear mixed with excitement), but also because of its political potentials; as Mattin describes, it provides tools to build a “factory without walls,” and it challenges us to “constantly question our motives, our modus operandi and their relation to the conditions that we are embedded in, to avoid recuperation by a system that is going to produce ideological walls for us” (Mattin 2009, 23).

It is in this sense that sound art practices are politically significant. These practices could also be considered a kind of freedom-searching act—setting one free from habitual sensual perceptions. Its “revolutionariness” lies in the making of sounds and the

\(^6\) Mattin is an artist working with noise and improvisation. The term “fragile moments” comes from Mattin’s article titled “Going Fragile” in *Noise & Capitalism* published by Arteleku Audiolab in 2009.
experience of listening. Sound art could afford a way of listening that invigorates one’s senses and cultivates one’s connection to the changing sensual world in a more direct and less-judgmental way (see more on listening in chapter six). Listening beyond security means to detach ourselves from rules and habits one grows attached to, or at least to become aware of them. This once again reminds us of Kierkegaard’s formulation: anxiety is always connected to the possibility of becoming free.
CHAPTER 4

THE UTOPIA OF RAYING TEMPLE AND FREE IMPROVISATION

The Utopian form itself is the answer to the universal ideological conviction that no alternative is possible, that there is no alternative to the system. But it asserts this by forcing us to think the break itself, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things would be like after the break.

Fredric Jameson “Archaeologies of the Future”

The moment of making noise is the making of a Mandala.70

Yan Jun

It is believed that utopias may exist anywhere: around a corner; behind a wall; inside a teahouse; deep in an alley; in the city center; inside a cramped home music studio, or in the virtual space of the Internet. Utopias could also be transfigured into a boat (e.g. Foucault’s heterotopian boat), a shared digital music file (online communities formed through music file sharing and music piracy71), a fleeting dream, an inarticulate feeling, or a state of being. For Maffesoli, utopia exists in the gaps of everyday life (Maffesoli 2005). The utopia of Raying Temple exists in a mysterious cult space, inside of which there were burning incense, Buddhist scriptures, and a small TV showing silent experimental films, with an open football field with white chalked lines outside, located on a dead-end street.

70 Translated from Chinese: 现场就是坛城。
71 Axel Stockburger discusses “the utopia of instant availability” in the case of digital pirate culture that is obsessed with the speed of transfer of digital music files and “the fame that can be gained with being the first to release.” He calls the practice “a utopia of ubiquitous instantaneous availability.” Axel Stockburger. “Utopia Inside: Tracing Aspects of the Utopian in Contemporary Sonic Culture” in Immediacy and Non-Simultaneity: Utopia of Sound. Ed. by Diedrich Diederichsen and Constanze Ruhm, Publications of the University of Fine Arts Vienna, Vol. 11, Schlebrugge, 2010.
Raying Temple is a music venue created and sustained by a small group of Beijing-based improvisational and noise musicians. It is also the name of a subcultural collective with a unique way of musicking\textsuperscript{72} and living. This chapter focuses on Raying Temple, discussing the collective’s utopian impulse as expressed through their music practice, the community culture, and the place of gathering and performing. Li Yangyang (usually referred to as Yangyang), one of the founders of Raying Temple, confidently argued with me when I questioned the possibility of utopia.

Utopia is a state of being.

State of being just exists. It is simple.

If the state of utopia has existed for one minute, does it still exist?

Its existence is eternal. If it was once there, it exists.

Many people deny its existence, because they didn’t catch this one-minute.

We do not expect it to exist forever. One minute is enough.

We are quite satisfied with that.

Most of the musicians at Raying Temple were born in the 1980s in northern China, mainly Shandong Province. By describing their lifestyles, worldview, and artistic practice, this chapter contends with the dominant discourse in both public media reports and academic works which depict the generation of 1980s Chinese as spoiled and selfish. For example, Wang Jing, the MIT professor of Chinese Cultural Studies, writes, “Utterly

\textsuperscript{72}The word musicking comes from Christopher Small’s book Musicking, in which he explains the word as “the present participle, or gerund, of the verb to music.” He proposes a definition of musicking, “To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing” (1998, p9). Christopher Small, Musicking: The Meaning of Performing and Listening. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1998.
spoiled and with an overblown view of themselves, this epicurean generation worships high-end brands and enjoys using its debit cards.” (2008: 211).

This chapter begins with a discussion of eras of utopias during and after the post-revolutionary time in China to contextualize Raying Temple’s utopian impulse in both general and specific situations under which its development is both possible and unique. I then depict the utopian collective of Raying Temple, discussing both the place and the community culture that to certain extent draw on the idea or ideal of communal life in previous state projects. Drawing from ethnographic research and existing discourses about free improvised music, in the last section I discuss how free improvisation contributes to the formation of a utopian collective and the social significance of both.

Eras of Utopias

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the country witnessed two strong waves of utopianism: the socio-political utopia of the 1960s and 1970s, and the cultural-aesthetic-linguistic utopia of the 1980s.

People’s Communes: Socio-Political Utopia

In China, collective life or 人民公社 [people’s communes] has a memorable history. In the late 1950s, as part of the plan to make China a modern communist society, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) launched “The Great Leap Forward” campaign. In support of this campaign, “People’s Commune” was made into the official state policy. As a utopianist himself, Mao Zedong strongly advocated commune life (Meisner 1982; Xin 2003). By the end of 1959 it was reported that more than 26,000 people’s communes
had been set up, covering 99 percent of all rural households in China (Chinatoday).73 People’s commune life did not allow private cooking or production. Every commune was assigned a leader to manage, distribute, and assign work to every member in the morning of each day.

Due to factors including natural catastrophes and flaws in political policy, “the great leap forward” campaign failed to increase the national income as promised and contributed to starvation and death on a national scale (Vine 2008). Immediately after three years of natural catastrophes, the ten-year, from 1966 to 1976, Cultural Revolution was launched. People with any association with individualism (linked to capitalist values) became targets of persecution. In the early 1980s, Deng Xiaoping rose to power in CCP. He stressed the importance of an economic development, which shifted the public’s attention from the political to economic aspect of social life (Wu 2010). People’s communes eventually vanished.

Awakening of the Subject: Cultural-Aesthetic-Linguistic Utopia

During 1970s the socio-political utopian ideal reached its height. By the end of the 1970s, when people had grown disillusioned with the socio-political vision of utopia, another name of utopianism seemed to emerge among Chinese intellectuals and writers, known as the cultural elite (Wang 1996). The decade of the 1980s witnessed a campaign in literature towards an exploration of subjectivity and self-consciousness, represented by the root-searching school and the experimentalists (Wang 1996; Zhang 1997).74 According to Wang Jing in High Culture Fever, “the root-searching school made their

74 For further discussions on genres and themes in modern Chinese literature, see Wang Jing’s High Culture Fever, and Zhang Xudong’s Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms.
debut during the culture discussion in 1985 as an aesthetic movement that served as a figurative cipher of redemption and rational self-reflexivity” (181). Wang identifies two conflicting ways of looking at the utopianism of the root-searching school. One is the utopian effort in constructing “an authentic cultural subjectivity of China, which is subject to essentialist recuperation,” and the other is the utopian belief in “an open-ended capacity for self-reflexivity, which enjoys the potential of bailing itself out of essentialist discourse as such” (181).

Opposed to the root-searching school’s efforts in constructing subjectivity as either authentic or self-reflexive, the experimentalists represent another aesthetic utopianism, which deconstructed subjectivity. As Wang suggests, Chinese experimentalists, “for the first time in modern and contemporary Chinese literary circles,” viewed themselves “as partners with rather than contenders against the First-World authors” (201). Wang calls the utopia of Chinese experimentalists “linguistic utopianism,” for a keen focus on the language game and erasure of the self found in the post-modern and post-structural movements started among the First-World intellectuals. Despite this inner contradiction, Wang still finds the two literary movements similar in their attempts at “romancing the subject”—represented either by constructing the self or by erasing it. For Wang, both movements suggest “with various depths of sincerity the zeitgeist of the 1980s in post-Mao China,” which was absent in the ethos of 1990s pop culture and consumerism (232).
Farewell Utopia: Rock Music as a Knife

Although it is widely believed that the Tiananmen Square incident of June 4, 1989, marked the disillusion of Chinese intellectuals’ utopian ideal, it is still important to recognize the power of this event to fuel a utopian sentiment among the first generation of rock musicians in China. The documentary Farewell Utopia [also known as Night of an Era], released in 2009, is a rare record by which we learn about the peak of Chinese rock music in the early 1990s. It depicts the first generation of rock musicians’ utopian ideal in cultivating the “rock spirit,” searching for faith, and using music as a weapon of social criticism. The documentary interviewed major rock musicians in the twenty-first century and captured sentiments of frustration and anxiety, as well as a deep reflexivity among these musicians. Though normally we blame the profit interests of the commercial culture and the music industry for bringing rock music’s utopia to an end, the documentary implies it was also because of most musicians’ inability to cope with the market.

For many, rock music’s utopian era during the early 1990s was too short to be recognized. It is nonetheless essential that we understand the immediate and specific situation under which the underground experimental and noise music culture composed itself. From a more theoretical standpoint, the recognition of the utopia of rock music suggests a desynchronized occurrence of utopianism in different cultural domains despite being situated in similar socio-political milieus. Thus Wang Jing may be a bit hasty when she calls the 1990s “the post-topia” era, without closely examining any cultural

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75 “As a knife” refers to Cui Jian’s (the Godfather of China’s rock music) well-known song “Like a Knife,” which also appears as the title of Andrew Jones’ book Like a Knife: Ideology and Genre in Contemporary Chinese Popular Music (1992).
practices except literatures. I argue that as an impulse or a desire to break away from the dominant system, utopia often exists and finds its expression in varied cultural practices. Furthermore, it is also important to recognize that as the dynamics of socio-cultural milieus change, each utopia’s tension with the dominant system also changes.

Ridicule of Collectivism and the Birth of the Generation of Me

Deng Xiaoping’s economic policy started to take effect in the early 1980s. China seemed to regain its vitality after the destruction caused by the Great Leap Forward Campaign and ten years of Culture Revolution. However, from the beginning of the era of economic reform problems arose, including the production of fake and inferior goods and issues of corruption, as well as increased wealth inequality between urban and rural populations and between coastal and inland cities. Eruption of student protests and the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989 destabilized Chinese society once again. The incident made many Chinese intellectuals and artists realize the intimidating power of the collective, and the danger and death it could provoke. These historical events rendered the ideology of collectivism problematic and disappointing, which partially explains the self-searching movements in the elite culture. The people’s commune life and the ideology of collectivism became targets of ridicule, constructed as absurdities in China’s modern history. This special period of history interestingly has become a rich resource for China’s contemporary arts, such as Wang Guangyi’s political pop art series and Zhang Xiaogang’s paintings, representative of Cynical Realism that presents symptoms and sensations of the collective mentality. Artistic works referencing this period are found almost everywhere in the 798 Art District.
The emergence and increasingly dominant ideology of individualism in the mass culture (as distinguished from the root-searching school and experimentalists’ obsession with self and subjectivity in the 1980s) proved to be particularly promising in improving the quality of life for individuals, especially among the young generations (born in the 1980s and 1990s). Consumerism is one oft-discussed factor contributing to the shift from collectivism to individualism in Chinese society. Another significant factor is Mao’s “one child policy,” implemented in 1979 to slow the rapid population growth in China. Generations influenced by this policy are often called “the lonely generation,” with both parents working regular eight-hour jobs. At the same time, the “the generation of me,” labels them as spoiled and self-centered. De Kloet’s comment is representative of public opinions of this generation, particularly the generation of the ‘80s.

This new generation of “little emperors,” as they are often cynically referred to, all come from one-child families, born after the Cultural Revolution. For them, China has always been a country which is opening up, a place of rapid economic progress and modernization, a place of prosperity and increased abundance, in particular in the urban areas (de Kloet 2010: 22).

Individualism in China itself is a complicated issue, the exploration of which goes beyond the scope of the current project. My discussion of the phenomenon is to contextualize my later description and analysis of Raying Temple’s collective life as well as its strain of individualism. This is necessary since collectivism may evoke sentiments among Chinese people not found in people living in countries and cultures where
individualism has been a dominant value for centuries. In China, the value of individualism in the mainstream culture is modern and contemporary. It was a means to rebel against standardization and the occlusion of individuality in Mao’s time. From this standpoint, individualism and consumerism are a kind of liberation. The widely recognized downside is that the young generations are becoming indifferent and numb to political and social issues, and growing mindlessly obsessed with a culture of consumption (de Kloet 2010; Liu 2004; Rofel 2007; Wang 1996). What follows suggests something different about the young generations: how they are affected by the larger social-cultural milieu in contemporary China and how they cope with it and aspire to live a more creative and spiritual alternative life.

The Utopia Collective Raying Temple

My Initial Visit

I first heard came across a reference to Raying Temple in an essay by He Xiaoyu when I was in the U.S. preparing for my fieldwork, a few months away. The essay is titled “Dedicated to Raying Temple Burned Down by Fire.”

“Nothing but ashes,” they described to me. I was shocked. My memories were suddenly covered by ashes. Only after awhile could I recall the old images: the bronze shrine, performers facing the shrine, the drum set, effects, wires, stickers on the wall… Li Jianhong’s long hair, bouncing to the rhythm of his rocking body, is like a flowing curtain of the past…Raying Temple is a base of underground culture set up by a small group of young guys… they sell beer for only five Yuan. Nearby, there is
a noodle restaurant, selling a big bowl of noodle for only two Yuan (He 2010).

Raying Temple’s website reads, “An underground community with love and freedom, a temple of the cosmos.” Yan Jun, when I asked him about Raying Temple commented, “It is the only underground bar in the real sense in Beijing.”

Located in the Tongzhou area, Raying Temple is an hour’s subway ride the center of Beijing. My first trip there was with Niko and his girlfriend. Niko (a.k.a “…”) is a laptop noise musician from Switzerland, and was on a solo music tour across Asia. We met at the 2 Kolegas bar for an improvisational/noise music show. Knowing that I was interested in visiting the place, Yan Jun asked me to contact Yangyang so that Niko could perform there and we could go together. I made the contact, and Yangyang said he would include Niko in a show they already planned, titled [Improvisation, Serious] in two days. The three of us met at the subway station. It was raining heavily. Following Yangyang’s direction, we got off the subway and took an illegal taxi. It was, in fact, difficult to find a legal taxi in this area because of the dominance of illegal ones. The driver raised the price by thirty percent due to the rain.

After a few turns, as it was getting dark, we finally saw the lighted sign for Raying Temple. It was a two-story building. Upon entering, we went directly upstairs. Yangyang, with his long hair casually tied up in a bun, was wearing a white t-shirt with an interesting symbol on the front. Niko was excited to see Yangyang’s t-shirt and he said he had seen Li Zenghui wearing one like it while performing at 2 Kolegas bar. The t-shirt sported the logo of the Nojiji record label that is owned by Raying Temple; we
each bought one. While Niko and Yangyang went inside the performance space, I took the time to look around the meeting area where the bar was. The sofas and tables seemed old, but were covered with nice ethnic fabrics in Miao minority or Tibetan style. A wall close to the corridor was designed with arched windows; on the upper level of the wall hung a horizontal scroll of the scripts of the Heart Sutra. The windowsills held several antique lamps and a small bookshelf. There were Tibetan lamps, a framed picture of a Buddha, and a bronze shrine (see fig. 23, 24), perhaps the shrine He Xiaoyu remembered.

Fig.23. Framed Buddha picture in Raying Temple (photo by author, 2010)
It rained all night. Including me, there were ten people in Raying Temple for the show: four musicians in the show, the soundman Weicheng, the bartender (Weicheng’s girlfriend), and three musician friends of Raying Temple. No one seemed to be bothered by the size of the audience. At the end, they did a jam session with everyone in the room, other than the soundman, the bartender, and me.

The first visit raised all kinds of questions for me. Who are these musicians? Who comes to this place? Who owns the venue? What do all the Buddhist objects suggest? I went back to Raying Temple several times. It attracted me with its decoration and its geographical tension with Beijing. Yangyang and other Raying Temple people
often jokingly said, “We seldom go to Beijing.” On my third visit to Raying Temple, I scheduled an interview with Yangyang in order to learn about the place, especially the musicians, the community, and their music practices.

When I arrived, Yangyang was talking with a young couple in the performance room. I waited outside, reassessing the place by daylight. The couple was there to check out a guitar Yangyang was selling. They haggled over the price but did not seem to make a deal. Yangyang looked at Weicheng, who came in a few minutes after me, and said, “He asked me to come down by one hundred Yuan (about 15 US dollars), should I sell it to him? One hundred… maybe I should sell it?” Then he ran downstairs and called the man back. “I needed the money,” he said while getting ready for our interview.

A: How do you all make a living? This is a big place. How do you sustain it?

Yangyang pointed to Weicheng,

He knows devices, so he has opened an online store through Taobao,\(^\text{76}\) selling stuff like instruments, effects. Everyone has a way to survive. Some are freelancers. I went to shows. Sometimes I have to sell instruments. But none of us has enough money.

He went to make tea, saying that he needed time to get into the mood.

\(^{76}\) A website for online shopping in China, similar to Ebay and Amazon.
The Place and Its “Nirvana”

Raying Temple was originally a rehearsal place in Sun Zhuang [Sun village] in the Tongzhou district. It was a small room Yangyang and his friends rented in 2003 for the convenience of practicing. Over seven years, Raying Temple has moved four times. It was named Raying Temple in 2004, the year the first *Frightened by Dog Live Festival* was held (see chapter two for further discussion of the festival). During the first few years, Raying Temple was open only when the musicians needed to practice or meet friends. In 2007, due to the small size of the room, Yangyang and his friends started to look for a new place. They found a deserted factory, which used to be an animal feed
plant and sheep pen. It was a large place so they started to host shows, but it only lasted about a year because a property developer took the place back. They moved to a small gatehouse owned by a private fish farm on August 8, 2008, the day of the 2008 Olympic Game opening ceremony. Since the place was so small, they no longer hosted shows but used it only for rehearsals or improvisational practice with a few friends. This venue lasted almost two years until it burned during the national Chinese Spring Festival in 2010 (see fig. 26).
Halfway through my interview with Yangyang, we started to talk about the fire, though I was not sure in the beginning whether he would be willing to discuss it. He responded surprisingly well.
It happened during the spring festival in February this year. Our landlord called us in the morning, asking us to come quickly.

It was snowing heavily. I went, and wasn’t really prepared to see what I saw… Only ashes. Nothing was left, but the small bronze statue of Wenshu Pusa [Manjusri Bodhisattva].

He pointed at a bronze statue next to the top of the entrance door, the same one I noticed during my first visit.

We had it since the first Raying Temple. Everything else was gone. Instruments, devices that were worth like ten or twenty thousand Yuan. We were already poor at that time. But at the moment, I felt joy inside.

I saw everything we had was gone; things we collected over five year were gone. Empty. It was good. A relief. I didn’t feel sad, but joy instead. In fact, if you want it to be empty, it could not happen. But the fire made it happen. All of a sudden, your memory, your possessions, disappeared. It is a great relief.

I have actually thought about leaving Beijing since the fire, but I still have so many friends here.

Quite by accident, we found this place.

One day in March, we were strolling in this area, a middle-aged guy asked us whether we were looking for places to rent.

He showed us this place. It seems that everyone wants to rebuild Raying Temple, and we decided to take the offer.

[He stood up, walked to the bar, and added hot water to the teapot.]
It was the nirvana of Raying Temple. The old place was too small. It has to evolve, but in what way? No one had expected that this was its selected way. Apparently, Raying Temple is not simply a place, but has become a kind of cultural community with a certain lifestyle, values, and practices that are particularly important and attractive for certain people. Objects used in Raying Temple suggested a kind of subcultural lifestyle. Ethnic fabrics, collected from the Yunan province in China, Tibet, and Nepal, are used as tablecloths and hanging decoration. Together with the use of Tibetan lamps, the ethnic fabrics suggested Raying Temple’s musicians’ taste in Buddhism (Chan and Tibetan Buddhism) and minority cultures (i.e. Miao and Zang Minorities). The bronze statue of Wenshu Pusa [Manjusri Bodhisattva] shared its life silently with Raying Temple. After it survived the fire, it became the core symbol for the eternity of the place and the community, representing something that stands as a testimony of changes—the changelessness of changes. Limited by their budget, they renovated Raying Temple either with items found in recycling stations or purchased cheaply at secondhand markets. They bought secondhand clothes, which is difficult for mainstream Chinese to accept. Most secondhand clothes markets were underground and are illegal in various Chinese cities. These markets provide clothes imported from overseas (especially Japan and Europe) at extremely low prices. Stylistically, the clothes often stood out as vintage, unique, and hip. These observations made me more curious to learn about this community.
The Community

At the age of 17, Yangyang started playing rock music and organizing bands in college. After two years, he quit college and started to play noise/improvisational music. He only learned in recent years that what he has been playing is called free improvisation. He joined the underground music circle in Qingdao. During that time, most rock music bands were based in Beijing, and the majority of rock music was produced there. In 2003, Yangyang decided to go to Beijing to pursue his dream in rock music. After drifting in the city for almost a year, using up his small amount of savings, he settled down in the Tongzhou district with the help of a musician friend who came from the same province. Tongzhou has been an ideal place for young painters, musicians, and poets from other provinces who could not afford the expensive rents in Beijing, but still wanted to be close to the capital city. In the Tongzhou district, Yangyang started to meet more rock musicians, largely from the same province he came from. Rock music, to some extent, was their food, job, and spiritual support.

Y: At that time, every one of us had the idea of utopia. We did not care much about making money, but were more concerned with enriching and strengthening our inner worlds.

A: Do you think Raying Temple has provided such a utopia?

Y: Of course, we have been thinking so. If not, we hope it will.

Yangyang is usually considered the owner of Raying Temple, but he corrected me when I referred to him as such.
Y: It is not my own. It belongs to a couple of us. It is just that I take more responsibility and spend more time taking care of this place. All I want to do is to create a place where people come together, make music and feel happy.

A: Who is in this community? Is there a fixed number of people in Raying Temple?

Y: It always changes. There is no such thing as a membership. People will come and stay with us at Raying Temple for a while. Some will leave if they find out this is not a life they like or they are not this type of person. Some will stay.

A: Have there been conflicts in the community?

Y: There are conflicts; you know, we all make mistakes. But what I find common among us is that this group of people is cleaner and purer. Some of us sometimes made mistakes, hurting others or being selfish. If we found out, we would sit down together and talk. We discuss the problem directly and ask the person to change. But it is up to the individual. If this is not the life you feel right to live, you will not stay.

While we were talking, Yangyang showed me a stack of readings, containing Chinese translations of John Cage’s *From Zero*, poetry by Kakovski, and texts about the Islamic religion. It has been a tradition for the community to share readings with each other, particularly theoretical works by radical and eccentric thinkers like Michel Foucault and Georges Bataille, as well as literary works by the Beat Generation. They print out hard copies and leave them in the room for people to read, or forward items to
everyone through emails. By the end of 2009, they had begun the small journal *Noise*, released by the *Nojiji* record label, distributed among friends within the circle.

He handed me the first issue, released in December 2009. The opening article is the Chinese translation of Foucault’s preface to his book *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, followed by an interview with the poet Charles Bukowski titled *Poetry Villain*; an except from Georges Bataille’s novel *Madame Edwarda*; a poster of *Frightening by Dog Live Festival* 2005; an article introducing Fluxus; an interview with GG Allin; a poetry section with Shamsoddin Mohammad’s poems, two poems by Xue Ran (from the band *Maze*) and one by Yangyang; an essay written by Zhang Zhongshu (from the band *Mafeisan*); and interviews with Japanese sound artist Otomo Yoshihide and Toshimaru Nakamura. The journal is a collage of diverse types of materials, some from academic journals and some from Wikipedia. There is an obvious tendency to include obscure and marginal materials in all areas, including religion, music, poetry, and philosophical thought.77

While the objects in Raying Temple suggest the community’s link to Eastern religious thought (i.e. Chan and Tibetan Buddhism), the literary works they share and read indicate the influence of the Beat Generation, radical and critical thinkers from the West, and various cult and subcultural sensibilities. In addition, the community’s mode of dress, their use of drugs, and advocacy for love and sexual liberation further suggest

77 More examples from the journal that illustrate my point include an article introducing Shamanic practices (articles found on website like Wikipedia and Baidu); a few paragraphs introducing the six- syllable mantra of bodhisattva of compassion, “Om Mani padme hum”; a long translated section from “The Scripture of the Golden Eternity” by Jack Kerouac; a poem by Ji Gong (a monastic in the Southern Song Dynasty [960-1279] known for his eccentric behavior and compassionate nature); an article on the Theosophical Society, Anthroposophy, Freemasonry, Rosicrucian, Theosophy, and the final article of the Heart Sutra.
the influence of America 1960s hippie culture. These elements also make Raying Temple particularly attractive to foreign artists, musicians and scholars with similar intellectual and artistic sensibilities.

The combination of Eastern and Western subcultural sensibilities is also expressed through Raying Temple’s musicians’ use of words in the title of their music works and music groups. In 2009, Nojiji released an album titled, “Heart of Nothingness the Universe.” It contains four tracks of improvised noise music done by the group Mafeisan (Zhang Zhongshu and Li Yangyang). The names of the four tracks suggest something about their mixed non-mainstream tastes: “A Universe of Sex Monitoring,” “The Second Batch of Powder,” “Arapacana,” and “Shaman Dance.” Several bands formed among musicians in Raying Temple use names like Ong (referring to the Buddhist syllable Om or Aum), Maze (with a mysterious sentiment), and Mafeisan (a powder known as the world’s earliest anesthesia invented by the Chinese physician Hua Tuo in the Han Dynasty). The title of the album Heart of Nothingness the Universe particularly drew my attention and reminded me of a mistake I made during my initial visit to the place.

Collective Belief: 虚无之心宇宙

During my first visit to Raying Temple, I noticed a line of characters printed on the wall of its guest room, but ignored its potential importance to the community. I made this discovery after the individual shows and before the last jam session when everyone went to the guest room to rest, smoke and chat. On the wall were printed six large

78 The meaning of this sentence exists in the characters and also the relation between the characters, thus an English translation of will not render the original meaning and might also lead to misunderstanding. So I decided to use the characters as written on the wall of Raying Temple.
characters: “虚无之心宇宙.” Niko asked what the words meant and I struggled to translate the characters “虚无,” which I eventually translated as nihilism. The two characters suggested to me the value of “hedonism” and “doing nothing.” Since I thought I was the only one in the room speaking both Chinese and English, I explained my interpretation to Niko without asking Yangyang and the other musicians. I even commented that the whole sentence seemed to be missing a character to give it a coherent sense! Yangyang was relaxing on the sofa, smoking from a gourd from Xinjiang, and did not bother to explain. However, during our interview when Yangyang talked about the fire and showed me the music album, I realized that 虚无 could also be translated as emptiness, nothingness, or even transcendence. In fact, when it is translated, the meaning suggested by the characters slips away. The English translation fails to capture the purposeful ambiguity in and between the characters.

虚无 is worldview. It is doing nothing, but also doing anything possible.

In Buddhism, if nothing exists, there is no negativity or positivity. But, of course, there still is a difference between the spiritual life and the material life in society. We cannot only live as we imagined.

After a long pause, he seemed to realize something.

I think of another way of explaining 虚无. Like this cup of water, whether you drink it or not, it is always a cup of water. The fact of the breathing of every living being will not change, no matter what you do, or whether you do anything. I call this state of breathing 虚无.
Related to the idea 无, Yangyang also stresses the importance of 真我 [a true/authentic self] shared among Raying Temple people. Referring again to Chan Buddhism, Yangyang described 真我 as a mode of existence before it has been processed through consciousness and knowledge, a mode before the self takes “chemical reactions.”

There must be a real self existing in our life. 真我 is like the water. We breathe and exist, nothing added by our consciousness, cognition or knowledge. We have not received any knowledge, and have no experience, … that is 真我. What we present now is the outcome of certain experiences, after some chemical reactions.

When I listened to the interview recordings later, I realized how little time we spent in talking about music. I asked Yangyang about music when we discussed 真我 [true self], but his answer seemed to conclude the topic. I may have interpreted his answer as suggesting to me that to know about Raying Temple’s music is to listen to it, rather than talking about it. So I did not continue asking, or even know how to continue asking.

A: What is music to you, especially to your 真我?

Y: Many bands treat music as a profession, but it is a part of my life. People often ask me “What do you want to express?” I do not want to express anything. I present myself. You hear it. That’s enough.

Free Improvised Noise Music

If ideas of 无 [nothingness] and 真我 [a true/authentic self] could be considered as the conceptual expression of Raying Temple’s utopian impulse, and the interior design of the place as its stylistic expression, then the group’s collectively improvised noise music would be the channel through which the utopian impulse find sonic and non-
linguistic expression. But how and why is making improvised noise music pertinent to Raying Temple’s utopian impulse and how does it contribute to the formation of the collective?

First, free improvised noise music relates to a true self as Yangyang described. In answer to my question of what music does to a true self, Yangyang suggests that free improvised noise music is where the true self—not processed through consciousness and knowledge—resides and the music is also a direct expression of this true self. Yangyang is not alone in believing that free improvised noise music expresses or reaches one’s true self. Another free improvisational group, Xingqian Chenlian⁷⁹ (members include Wang Zijian, Nie Long and Wang Ziheng) articulated a similar idea. I met the group in Raying Temple during an improvisation show they participated in. For this group, music is something that can reach and express one’s innermost and original self, which would not change over time. One of the members explained,

Similar to the Chan’s teaching of 明心见性 [knowing your heart, you will see your real nature]. 真我 [true self] is the thing that would not change over time. It is the relatively eternal thing. Some people might find things they did when they were young very childish, childish because they did not express what is closest to their true self. If you did something very close to your true self, when you group old you will find it still right. This is a state difficult to achieve, and music is not the only way. But music could achieve it.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Xingqian chenlian is a group from the city of Tianqin, still senior students in college. Wang Zijian and Nie Long were born in 1988, Wang Ziheng was born in 1989.
⁸⁰ Interview with the improvisational group, in my Beijing apartment, July 29, 2010.
Furthermore, as far as I could tell, the Buddhist idea of nothingness and a true self is believed to reside in the domain where language is no longer the most important means of expression and understanding. The difficulty in describing or explaining free improvised noise exactly in words fits into the Buddhist attitude toward language. Therefore, the relation between free improvised noise music and a true self consolidates Raying Temple’s collective belief “Heart of Nothingness the Universe.” This leads to my second question of how making improvised noise supports the kind of social bonding aspired to in Raying Temple. To answer to this question, I draw from both my fieldwork research and Western theorists addressing similar questions.

Seeking models for social relations from music practice is not a rare phenomenon in the study of music. Representative music theorists include Jacques Attali, Chris Cutler, Theodor Adorno, Fredric Rzewski, and Hakim Bey. Jacques Attali in his well-known book *Noise: the Political Economy of Music* proposes a model of music-making that is very similar to collective improvisation. He calls it composition:

Composition—a labor on sounds, without a grammar, without a directing thought, a pretext for festival, in search of thoughts—is no longer a central network, an unavoidable monologue, becoming instead a real potential for relationship. It gives voice to the fact that rhythms and sounds are the supreme mode of relation between bodies once the screens of the symbolic, usage and exchange are shattered. In composition, therefore, music emerges as a relation to the body and as transcendence (Attali 143).

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Attali points out and confirms the potentiality of collective improvisation in cultivating a desirable social relationship alternative to those based on usage and exchange. While Attali focuses on the political-economic aspect of this musical relation, other theorists discuss the interpersonal aspect in collective improvisation. In collective improvisation musicians are directly connected to each other (Nachmanovitch 1990, 99; Prévost 2004, 359). It is a relation not mediated by scores as in standard Western classical music composition (Prévost 359). In this direct relation, communication among musicians is subtle and immediate, and thus form a kind of intimacy “that cannot be reached through words or deliberation” (Nachmanovitch 99).

Musicians I met during fieldwork sometimes describe the process of collective improvising as “adjusting brainwaves,” and the desirable moments are when everyone, including musicians and audience, “connects through brainwaves” or “adjusts brainwaves to the same frequency.” Despite the cultural differences and musical backgrounds, Prévost, Nachmanovitch, and musicians from China all point to an unmediated connection among individuals, free from existing musical, social or linguistic structures. I will leave the physical aspect of free improvisation for later discussion in Chapter 6, and focus here on how free improvisation is signified on a socio-cultural level, and, as such, cements certain forms of social bonding in the Raying Temple collective.

Yan Jun once wrote, “The moment of making noise together is the making of a Mandala.” This does not get any closer to explaining what noise music is or how to make noise music, but it “explains” what “making noise together” does is seen through a particular worldview. Making a mandala is a religious and spiritual practice in Tibetan
Buddhism, a religious belief familiar to the people of Raying Temple. Once created, a sand mandala is dismantled. The colored sand is then collected in a jar and poured into a flowing river. Building and destroying a mandala understood as creating a world in which spirits connect and expand. It generates a space where restless and confused souls gradually settle down with each grain of sand dropping into a connection with the whole. To compare the process of collective free improvisation with the making of a sand mandala conveys the spiritual significance of the musical practice for these musicians. The biological connection (whether brainwaves or breath) or spiritual connection formed in collective improvisation suggests the connection of true selves, a connection that is felt to be real, natural and pure, this is what Raying Temple desires and tries to cultivate.

**Significance of Free Improvisation and the Utopia Collective**

The Raying Temple’s utopia does not suggest a political program but a more dispersed and ambiguous “utopian impulse” as Fredric Jameson calls it, which finds expression in everyday life. Therefore, it is not so much a longing for the “cloud cuckoo land” or the “peach blossom land,” as an engagement with everyday and artistic practices that quenches one’s spiritual and existential thirst for “utopia.”

Raying Temple’s utopian collective life contends with the mainstream depiction of the materialist generation of the 1980s, and challenges us to rethink collectivism and utopianism in contemporary China. The utopia of Raying Temple differs from historical

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82 Fredric Jameson distinguishes types of utopias based on his reading of utopia theorists like Ernst Bloch and Thomas More. Jameson describes “utopian impulse” as “detectable in daily life” and “practiced by a specialized hermeneutic or interpretive method.” See more in *Archaeologies of the Future* by Fredric Jameson.

83 The “Peach Blossom Land” is a story written by the well-known ancient Chinese poet Tao Yuanming, about a fisherman who accidently discovered a peach blossom land where its residents live happily and peacefully together, completely cut off from the outside world. The term “peach blossom land” is often used to describe a utopian land that is especially desirable for certain Chinese literati, writers and artists.
utopian eras in that it does not serve a socio-political agenda, advocate making music for music’s sake. Raying Temple’s utopia is a way of living (and living with) free from prescribed social rules, and political and commercial manipulations. As Fredric Jameson says, “The Utopian form itself is the answer to the universal ideological conviction that no alternative is possible, that there is no alternative to the system” (2005).

How does the utopia of Raying Temple connect to utopian communities in sound cultures in the Western context? In his research, Alex Stockburger discusses utopian drives among the twentieth century avant-garde musicians and artists, as well as what he calls “remnants of utopian drives” in the twenty-first century sound culture, covering popular music, sound in contemporary digital games, and online music communities. He describes avant-gardists’ utopian drives as “a part of the after effects of the ideological collapse of realized social utopian projects and mass movements,” which has been lost with the culture industry.

From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, most of these radical approaches seem to have become entirely submerged in the mainstream of cultural production and have therefore lost the flavor of difference that rendered them applicable to utopian thought. (2010, 181)

While claiming the receding popularity of the avant-gardists, he finds hope in the sound culture of the twenty-first century, which he calls an “internalized utopia.” Although this suggests to him “a retreat into a crystallized and isolated inner utopia of subjective potential,” Stockburger poses a speculation that reverberates with Attali’s prophetic vision, of whether this internalized utopian drive suggests “a kind of
contraction before a renewed growth of interest in alternative forms of social organization” (Stockburger 2010). The utopia of Raying Temple resembles this “internalized utopia” with its spiritual pursuit of a true self, and thus indicates to me a global connection in sound or music cultures’ interest in alternative forms of social organization.

Would the example of Raying Temple’s utopia provide a solution for the recognized evils and sickness of contemporary society? Would it even bring happiness as Attali’s model would suggest? Raying Temple does not aspire to answer these questions. Neither do Raying Temple musicians stress that the process of improvising would promise the kind of pure pleasure Attali envisions as central to composition, “a music produced by each individual for himself, for pleasure outside of meaning, usage and exchange” (Attali 1985, 137). The Raying Temple collective is not even concerned with what is after “the moment” of utopia. As Fredric Jameson argues for a utopian impulse that asserts the necessity to break free from the system “by forcing us to think of the break itself, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things would be like after the break” (2005).

Ultimately, I would like to suggest the significance of free improvisation, drawing from Raying Temple’s music practice as well as from free improvisers of whose work the collective is also familiar. I argue that free improvisation is free not in the sense of promising freedom by the end of it. Nor does it require a kind of freedom to begin with. Rather, it frees musicians during the process of improvising, not before or after it. Free improvising frees musicians from the composer and any prescribed musical structures.
Musicians are central to the creative process, not the composer if there is one. As Prevost points out in free improvising “is an attempt to put the musicians at the heart of the creative process,” while in classical music or mass-produced pop, “the musician has been creatively peripheral” (363). Each musician contributes to the whole in his or her unique way. And musicians coalesce with the sonic flow rather than controlling it. In collective improvising, it is no longer true that particular persons are responsible for the performance, but everyone shares responsibility in everything that happens. And this everyone includes the audience. Free improvisation requires heightened physical awareness, during which one feels one’s aliveness, vitality, and responsibility. This is fundamentally different from creating an illusion into which one escapes from one’s reality and after which one goes back to daily routines and habitual ways of perceiving.

The utopia of Raying Temple may have its own limitations, and the collective’s lifestyle may not be desirable or acceptable for many people. However, the existence of Raying Temple and its members’ practice of free improvised music suggest that the social role of music could go beyond entertainment and political propaganda, and that living an alternative way of life is possible.
CHAPTER 5

OUT OF BEIJING: TOURING WITH *SUB JAM*

One launches forth, hazards an improvisation. But to improvise is to join with the World, or meld with it. One ventures from home on the thread of a tune.

Deleuze and Guattari “A Thousand Plateaus”

Interdisciplinarity is always a site where expressions of resistance are latent.

Julia Kristeva “The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity”

In previous chapters, I discussed two spatial references of freedom in Beijing, collective affects that shape and are shaped by freedom-searching acts, and characteristics of a utopian music collective. Working with events and performances that occurred in Beijing, I analyze the political significance of sound art practice and how free improvised music is perceived to cement social bonds. In this chapter, however, I discuss the issues that emerged in a Mini Midi experimental music tour organized by Sub Jam outside of Beijing in two southern cities, Wuhan and Changsha. While the tour indicated certain connections (e.g. among music subcultures across China), it also reveals disconnections (e.g. between sound art and contemporary art) that remained invisible in Beijing. I argue that freedom as a spirit of crossing disciplinary boundaries exists only on a discursive level rather than in actual artistic practice. “Out of Beijing” suggests leaving “home” and encountering the unfamiliar. It also means facing different groups of audience members and getting affected by different “rhythms” of different cities. Only by being out of Beijing could one recognize what Beijing had provided for the sound art culture.
As one of the first-tier cities\(^{84}\) in China, Beijing models for second-tier cities (e.g. Wuhan and Changsha) the ways of managing the “aesthetic economy,” including building shopping malls, business centers, music clubs and contemporary art galleries. However, the specificity of each city—including its environmental, social, cultural, and historical conditions—changes the dynamics of sound artists’ performances. For example, in Wuhan and Changsha, there are more informal markets, sometimes illegal, which are almost cleared out in first-tier cities. Dining in night markets on streets is part of everyday life in Wuhan and Changsha, both of which are known as “cities of furnace” in China for their hot and humid summers. During the Mini Midi tour, most of the days ended with the group eating steaming food in local street markets steeped in the noises of honking cars, bicycle bells, and high jinks in local dialects over drinking games.

In these two cities, the Mini Midi group’s performance occurred in two kinds of spaces: music venues (“VOX Livehouse” in Wuhan and “Freedom House” in Changsha) and contemporary art galleries (“Manufactura’s Studio” in Wuhan and “New Millennium Center for Contemporary Art-Hu Nan” in Changsha). Both music venues could be seen as the spatial and cultural connections between Beijing’s underground music scene and other cities. Beijing’s sound art culture’s connection to music subcultures in other cities was shown through Mini Midi musicians’ familiarity with venues and their owners. Different from mainstream music bars where people come to drink and dance to popular music, VOX Livehouse and Freedom House attracted particular groups with their subcultural ambience, experienced first through their non-mainstream music shows (including independent, underground, and experimental music shows). Both venues

\(^{84}\) China’s first-tier cities include Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen.
suggest a sense of rebellion and coolness, desirable particularly for youth culture, as well as independent and underground music and art cultures. With the word *freedom* in either their titles or logos, both music venues arguably provided spatial references for freedom in the city in a symbolic way, providing places one could go in order to be free from mainstream tastes and values and those of the state. The word *freedom* in both music venues also reflected what the venue owners and frequent visitors associate with freedom, such as certain kinds of music, drinks, and clothing.

Although the word *freedom* does not directly appear in the names of the two contemporary art galleries Mini Midi group performed in, the idea of freedom is implicit in the experimental and interdisciplinary art practices both galleries tend to support—to make art free from pre-established canons or rules and to create art without disciplinary boundaries. While in Beijing sound art seemed to me to be already a part of contemporary art practice, issues occurred during the tour that indicated disconnections between sound art and the field of contemporary art in China. Reflecting on the dissatisfactions and conflicts that occurred in both galleries, I argue that while “interdisciplinarity” and “experimentality” have become key words used by contemporary art events to the attention of public media and get institutional funding, the “interdisciplinarity” or “experimentality” of Chinese contemporary art remains largely on a discursive level. In other words, Chinese contemporary art practice lags behind its own discourses.

In the following, I begin with introducing the Mini Midi Experimental Music Tour 2010, including its organizer Sub Jam and its theme. Then I discuss performances
and events in the two kinds of venues. I divide the performance venues as such because of their different relations to freedom. More importantly, the dynamics of Mini Midi musicians’ performances and experiences differed in music venues and gallery space. In the last section, I focus on discussing the canceled collaboration between the Mini Midi group and performance artists in the 2nd “Changsha” Live Art Festival. The Mini Midi Experimental Music Tour 2010 was one of the rare cases in which musicians were sponsored by art institutions: the Beijing Goethe Institute and the 2nd “Changsha” Live Art Festival. The economic mechanism behind the tour indicates sound art’s (particularly experimental music) link to contemporary art, especially the global contemporary art world. However, I argue that such a link is forced and still remains on a discursive and rhetorical level in China.

密集/Intense : Mini Midi Experimental Music 2010

The Organizer and Theme of Mini Midi 2010

Sub Jam is an independent “institute” enhancing China’s underground culture. Its focus on non-academic and non-official sound art works has increased in recent years. It organizes shows, concerts, and forums and also releases music works, design books, and poetry books by non-mainstream writers. From its start until today, Sub Jam remains non-official and non-commercial.

The history of Sub Jam has roughly three stages. The first stage was from 1998 to 2004. The canceled concert (“Spring of New Music, 1998” curated by Yan Jun in the city of Lanzhou; see chapter two) gave birth to a network of new connections that demarcated itself from the mainstream and commercialized rock music scene. In 2001,
the experimental musician Wang Fan coined the Chinese term 撒把芥末, corresponding to the English one, Sub Jam. As a close friend of Yan Jun over the years, Wang Fan has always been important for Yan Jun and Sub Jam, but he was never a collaborator in the sense of organizing projects or getting involved in its practical operation.

Beginning in 2004, Yan Jun began to collaborate with the musician and painter Wu Quan and the group FM3 (a duo comprised of Zhang Jian and Lao Zhao; FM3 is the inventor of *Buddha Machine*). The formation of this new group marked the beginning of the second stage of Sub Jam, lasting three years, from 2004 to 2007. Yan Jun, Wu Quan, and FM3 co-founded two music labels: Waterland Kwanyin and Kwanyin. Together they organized music events. According to Yan Jun, the year 2004 was the beginning of a group activity in its real sense. But soon after, the group disintegrated when each of them began to reveal different perceptions of what music should be and do. Eventually, their personal ambitions and individual problems pulled the group apart. Waterland Kwanyin sound series reflected the separation. At the beginning, the whole group would organize and attend every event. But later, FM3 and Wu Quan came only occasionally. Finally, only Yan Jun was left to organize shows. “It was a sad development,” Yan Jun said, “It became in the end ‘Yan Jun’s Waterland Kwanyin’.” In 2007, Sub Jam experienced its lowest moment when, in Yan Jun’s words, the members lost their “spiritual connections.”

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85 Buddha Machines, a sound loop player adapted from Buddhist chanting music box, is invented by FM3, a Beijing based sound art/experimental music group.
86 According to Yan Jun, the name Waterland Kwanyin was coined by Zhang Jian.
87 For more information about their different ideas on music, see my interview with Yan Jun at http://earroom.wordpress.com/2012/01/09/guest-edition-2-adel-wang-jingyan-jun/
The third stage began when Ruan Qianrui, a young freelancer in graphic design, joined Sub Jam. Ruan Qianrui learned about Yan Jun and Waterland Kwanyin through friends. In our interview he said,

I worked at a large real estate company owned by a Taiwanese man in Beijing. But I became bored with my job and was confused with what I wanted to do. In 2008, a friend told me about Waterland Kwanyin sound series. I went and was immediately attracted by the type of music and people there. In the beginning, I was just an audience member. I saw Yan Jun a couple of times at the shows, but I did not talk to him.88

In 2008, Ruan Quianrui sent Yan Jun an email, asking whether he could design posters and record covers for Sub Jam because he made better ones. Without knowing whom this person was, Yan Jun agreed. It turned out to be a surprise for both. Ruan is creative, witty and playful. His personality clicked with Yan Jun. According to Yan, Ruan’s designs of posters and CD sleeves captured the soul of the music works and sound events released and organized through Sub Jam. At the same time, these sound art works inspired Ruan’s designs to be bolder and go deeper. Yan praised Ruan as the best designer he had met and suggested his designs be viewed independently as art works. As a birthday present in 2010, Yan Jun gave Ruan a thick art book with picture collections of Dadaist and Surrealist artworks. In 2011, Ruan’s design book Burned Blueprint was released through Sub Jam, and Ruan went to London for a collective exhibition of his designs. In our interviews, Yan Jun quoted Ruan more than once, “Sub Jam is not professional, but we are going to be more professional than the professionals.”

88 Interview with the author, July 2010, Tongzhou, Beijing.
Over the years, Sub Jam has initiated and organized a variety of activities, including concerts, festivals, sound art projects, exhibitions, workshops and forums. From the beginning of 2010, there started a “Sub Jam miji [intense] blog,” on which anyone could freely publish anything, including poetry, essays, music reviews and reader’s digests, class notes and translations of English texts. There was also a “Sub Jam miji radio program” hosted by musicians or music critics, directly accessible through the website of the miji blog.

Whenever I got a chance I asked Yan Jun: “What is Sub Jam?” And every time he gave me a different answer.

It is everyday life. It is a basement of creation.

It is not an organization. It is not going to have a large scale.

It is rhizome. It is not international. It is not professional.

Ruan Qianrui’s poster design of Sub Jam’s history is a pictorial explanation of the nature of Sub Jam (see fig. 27). On the left part of the poster, the Chinese characters describe what Sub Jam is. By using Google translation, the meanings become further fragmented and illogical, suggesting a sense of playfulness and at the same time expressing Ruan’s attempt at mystification. On the right side is a collage of symbols, including names of labels, music festivals organized by Sub Jam, as well as a sign for anarchy. On the lower right corner of the poster is Ruan’s design for Mini Midi 2008, “Noise is Free.”
Fig. 27. Poster design, Sub Jam history series, designed by Ruan Qianrui, 2010
Mini Midi Experimental Music Festival started in 2005. Before 2010, it was either held in Haidian Park or in 2 Kolegas Bar in Beijing. In 2010, for the first time, it occurred in the form of tours in different cities. Mini Midi 2010 began in the city of Shanghai from May 1st to 4th, continued in the city of Fu Zhou in May, Quan Zhou and Xia Men in June, Wuhan and Changsha in July. Besides musical performances, Mini Midi’s Wuhan (July 17-22) and Changsha (July 24-26) tour was combined with two other art events: a five-day workshop in Wuhan organized by the German artist Elke Marhöfer; and the 2nd “Changsha” Live Art Festival.

The theme of this year’s Mini Midi Festival was 密集/Intense. The Chinese title 密集 came from Vajrayana Buddhism. In Vajrayana Buddhism, 密 means secret while 集 means getting together. The English title Intense is not a literal translation of the Chinese one. Intense is related to the Deleuzian idea that one should live an intense and vital life. Ruan Qianrui came up with the Chinese title, and Yan Jun suggested the English one (see fig. 28).

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89 Beginning in 2011, Mini Midi music festival will be renamed as Intense, to avoid the common confusion the public makes between Midi festival and Mini Midi festival.
Performance Venues—Live Houses and Contemporary Art Galleries

In this section, I first discuss two music venues, focusing on the space, audience, and performances. Both venues distanced themselves from the mainstream ones by featuring independent and underground music. Audiences had to pay entrance fees to attend shows of Mini Midi in both venues, which was later shared among musicians. In contrast, in both gallery venues, which hosted workshops and an art festival, there was no
entrance fee and both events were described as “open to the public.” However, this kind of openness has its own limitations and conditions.

**VOX Livehouse: Voice of Youth, Voice of Freedom (Wuhan)**

VOX Livehouse is known as the center of the underground rock scene in the city of Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province (see fig. 29). All kinds of bands, both local and international, have performed here. All are noted on small pieces of wooden plaques painted with bands’ names and icons hung on the wall inside of the livehouse (see fig. 30). I spotted plaques of Raying Temple and Nojiji. Sound check started five hours before the show. A few more musicians came and joined us: Junky, from Shanghai, the founder of the noise group *Torturing Nurse*, and Leon from London, a traveling noise musician. While waiting for sound check, musicians started drawing their wooden “name cards.” Weiwei (a.k.a. Vavabond) drew a crop circle to represent *VagusNerve*, the psychedelic noise duo she formed with Li Jianhong. Fenghao, a professional graphic designer, drew the logo of *Walnut Room*, a band he formed with the performance sound artist Li Zenghui. Most just drew their names.

The show started with Yan Jun’s introduction to the audience of Mini Midi and individual musicians. Yan was the first performer of the night with his feedback noise system. Among audiences there were foreigners, people in their 20s and 30s (some seemed to be even younger), white-collar workers, artsy-looking people, as well as local punks. There were people who came particularly for the show or for certain musicians.

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90The show included Yan Jun’s feedback noise performance, Walnut Room’s (Feng Hao and Li Zenghui) guitar, saxophone and voice improvisation, Vagus Nerve’s psychedelic noise improvisation (Li Jian Hong’s guitar, and Weiwei’s laptop), Wang Ziheng’s toys, voice and saxophone improvisation, Junky and Leon’s harsh noise.
like Yan Jun or Li Jianhong, as well as those who mistook it for a punk or rock music night. Almost five minutes after Yan Jun started his feedback noise performance, at a moment when there were mainly high-pitched sounds, an audience standing next to me asked whether the show had started. After Yan Jun’s performance, some of the audience members left. During the last show by Junky and Leon, most of the audience covered their ears and withdrew from the area near the stage. Many left the room. Leon rolled on the floor while making vocal noises with the microphone. Junky pushed over the table, ending the show with a long and piercing sound. I retreated to the area with the wooden plagues and overheard two young women commenting that the last one seemed more like performance art.

While musicians were packing, staff members started to arrange round tables and chairs in the middle of the room, preparing for the next show. Downstairs at VOX Livehouse, outside, the street was already transformed into a night food market, with congregations of vendors of barbecued fish, meat and vegetables, fried bean sheet, and roasted yam. Vendors use mobile carts with tiny portable kitchens. We chose a vendor with relatively big tables and a dozen small plastic stools and ordered basically everything on the menu. One of the musicians made a comment that there was a larger audience than expected.
Fig. 29. The front stage of VOX Livehouse, Wuhan. Photo from the official website of VOX Livehouse

Fig. 30. Wooden name cards on the walls of VOX Livehouse. On the table are musicians’ CDs and books for sale (photo by Author, 2010)
After the show, the group left the district where VOX Livehouse was located and moved to another district closer to the Manufactura’s Studio for the following five-day workshop. Therefore, there was not much interaction between musicians and venue owners and staff members. While in Changsha, Freedom House provided not only a performance venue, but also a place for the Mini Midi group to stay over three days. Thus, I learned more about Freedom House. I had a chance to see how Houzi, one of the owners of Freedom House, roasted coffee beans to save money and guarantee the quality of their coffee—shaking pots of raw coffee beans over the stove in late evenings and cooling it down in front of the air conditioner. I also witnessed a home “fashion show” when everyone came back from a second-hand clothes market with bags of extremely cheap but hip clothes.

**Freedom House (Changsha)**

Freedom House, a three-story music club, is located in Tai Ping Jie, one of the busiest walking avenues in the city of Changsha. The street is designed in pre-Qing dynasty’s style, populated with privately owned stores selling silk, clothes, local food and classical paintings, as well as different types of teahouses and bars.

The top floor of Freedom House was an attic; decorated in a Japanese minimalist style, it was designed for private and small talks. The second floor was the performance space with a half-finished wall painting. A spiral staircase connected the second floor to the ground one, which was small but with every corner carefully designed and used. On the long wooden tea table there was a colored wooden parrot and a bronze frog. On the shelf behind the table, there was a Swiss gold coffee filter, paper bags of roasted coffee
beans, stacks of delicate coffee cups and plates, and burning incense. In the corner near the stairs was a small and old wooden desk covered with calligraphy books, writing brushes, and a laptop playing silent experimental films. On the other side were packed bookshelves with probably hundreds of copies of books. I spotted a book I also owned, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain’t: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (Saul 2003).

I still remember the sounds, the crowds, and the balanced busy scene inside of Freedom House the first time we arrived. A frail looking girl (Houzi) with hair down to her knee sat behind the broad wooden tea table, preparing tea at a leisurely pace. Standing beside Houzi was a young guy (Beiou), busy selling tickets for a post-rock music show upstairs. He was also frail looking, wearing a long thin coat in a Japanese style, soft silky black pants, and a small ponytail on the back of his head. Beiou and Houzi had known each other through online music forums for a long time. He came to Changsha and joined Freedom House at Houzi’s invitation. He Zhiyao, the primary owner of Freedom House, which was funded by her father, organized most shows. The books in the floor-to-roof bookshelves belonged to her. She was also the one who chose the venue’s name *Freedom House*, because she liked a Minnesota based underground record label *Freedom From*. *Freedom From* was founded by Matthew St-Germaine in 1996, focusing on underground noise music from around the world.

In the community, there was also a much older man. Houzi said he was seen wandering on the street for a few days. Then He Zhiyao asked him to do some chores and kept him ever since. He became the doorman of Freedom House and also the DJ. Musicians jokingly talked about the reggae music he played before the Mini Midi music
show, and the special disco light effects he added in whenever the sounds grew intense.

There were also friends of Freedom House coming to help whenever they had time. They often commented how the music (free improvisation and experimental noise) turned people away from this place: “It’s just not the kind of bar where people drink and dance.”

On the same night we arrived, Beiou guided us to their newly rented apartment in which we spent the next three days with the Freedom House collective. We walked through an underground channel and passed vendors of fried crabs, noodle stores, carts of fresh vegetables and fruits, pots with hot boiling oil with golden fried mushrooms and
1. **Potatoes.** Bicycles and motorcycles were parked on both sides, some intruding into the streets; dirty streams of water were running from beneath the wheels of vendors’ carts.

   While we were chatting on the way, I learned Beiou was going to do a Butoh dance in the festival. Wang Ziheng, a young musician in the Mini Midi group, was surprised to find out our guide was Beiou, who is apparently well known in a certain online music community for listening to thousands of CDs and also generously sharing sources. Very soon I leaned that people at Freedom House were friends with people at Raying Temple. Not only do the two places resemble each other in interior design, but also people from the two communities are both obsessed with Buddhism, and passionate about free improvisation/experimental music. Compared with Raying Temple, Freedom House is a registered bar and is better equipped and financed.

   I asked Beiou how Freedom House sustained itself when I noticed the pitiful few guests they had during my stay. He replied, “He Zhiyao decided very early that this place is not to make money and it is enough if we can pay the rent and facilities. No one is paid. It is a special kind of community.” Later when I came back from the trip, I joined the online community of Freedom House. On its website, there are two different quotes, one in English and the other in Chinese,

   We all begin our lives in simple innocence, knowing deep down that all is good and all is love, we are home.

   重要的在于关注那些遮蔽在沉默之中的事物。\(^91\)

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\(^91\) It is important to pay attention to those hidden or covered in silence. Author’s translation.
VOX Livehouse is more commercial than Freedom House, and the performance spaces of both venues are more suitable for rock, punk, or folk music than experimental kinds. The Mini Midi musicians enjoyed their performances and were more at east in these venues. Conversely, musicians called their music shows 实, which means practical, concrete and real. They called the workshop session, to be discussed below; in Manufactura’s Studio 虚, literally translated as virtual, theoretical and hollow. Musicians appeared to be less comfortable when they perform in art spaces during the tour. These struggles suggest incongruities within sound art culture, and between sound art and China’s contemporary art world outside of Beijing.

**Manufactura’s Studio (Wuhan)**

Manufactura’s Studio is a private gallery in the city of Wuhan, hosting mainly contemporary artists’ visual, installation and multi-media works. It was opened in December 2008, and in June 2010 it moved to an upscale residential community. Elke Marhöfer’s solo exhibition *Material for Analysis for Oppositions*, as well as the five-day workshop participated in mainly by Mini Midi musicians was held in the new space of Manufactura’s Studio (see fig. 32 for poster). As described on the handout from Elke Marhöfer, the workshop was to present two filmic works Elke produced in 2009 and 2010 in Yunnan province in China. The workshop was meant to be a collaborative encounter between artists and non-artists, and among different artistic disciplines. It reads,

Facing the fragility of exchange, a collaborative encounter is organized by the artist on the occasion of the exhibition. The imagined dialogue
between artists and non-artists shall stimulate the production of knowledge through experimental, cross-disciplinary practice. A practice that will also change the space, so that the gallery is no longer only exhibition space, but also a “play-ground” for experimentation and research.

Fig. 32. Poster for ElkeMarhöfer’s solo exhibition in Manufactura’s Studio
Musicians in the Mini Midi group including Yan Jun, Li Jianhong, Xu Zhe, Zhao Junyuan were invited artists to the workshop. Yan Jun, Xu Zhe and Zhao Junyuan were identified as artists probably because their sound works had a Fluxus sensibility. Also, both Zhao Junyuan and Xu Zhe were trained in an art school in Germany and thus were more directly recognized as practicing artists. Although Li Jianhong often resisted being identified as an artist, his musical talents in improvisational and experimental music performances and the annual 2pi Festival he has organized have given him the status of artist in recent years. The rest of the Mini Midi musicians were then “non-artists” in this workshop series.

The workshop combined screenings with a series of events: a fieldtrip to the East Lake with the environmental activist Zhang Xianbing from Wuhan, improvised music performances, reenactment of performance artworks done by invited artists, and forum discussions. The design of the workshop showed Elke’s intention to make it multidisciplinary, and she secured a space for interactions and exchanges among artists and musicians. However, the workshop proceeded with difficulties.

One of the major problems was the space of the gallery, owned by a businessman who was seen most of the time during the five-day workshop but remained quiet. He also had his assistant documenting the whole process. But nothing more was known about him. While stating that the workshop is open to the public, the access to the gallery made it rather a private event. The gallery was inside of a well-guarded residential

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92 The gallery itself and its owner skipped my attention while I was on-site. As I researched more about the gallery after the fieldwork, there was no information open to the public about the history of this gallery and the owner. From the list of events on the studio’s website, there seems to be a tendency for the gallery to support contemporary art works (mainly visual and multi-media arts), as well as international artists’ work, especially those from European countries.
community; to get in we needed to show permit. Without having been given any permit, we had to call people already inside to lead us in. The space was roughcast, with a strong smell of paints and no ventilation devices. With the heat and humidity in the summer of Wuhan, just staying inside the gallery was a challenge, let alone actively thinking and reflecting on the exhibition. The experimental nature of the visual materials and somewhat abstract and theoretical questions Elke posed were just too much to absorb under such conditions. Elke apparently was not informed of the condition of the gallery space and appeared upset but had to use what was available.

Another difficulty arose was from language barriers. First of all, the handout was typed in English, including the description of the workshop and the daily schedule. However, not all participants could read or speak English. Elke spoke English but with a German accent. She had an interpreter, a volunteer college student majoring in English, but there were times when important artistic terms and concepts were mistranslated or simply missed. Although the two films Elke presented did not require translation, her explanations of the works and the subsequent discussion would have proceeded more smoothly with fewer language issues.

The space of the gallery, which was meant to be “a ‘play-ground’ for experimentation and research,” was in fact a place that hindered creativity, communication and experimentation. Although the workshop was designed as multi-disciplinary according to its description, its cross-disciplinarity was only realized in a superficial way, with one discipline being the audience for another. There was arguably little “multi-” or “cross-” disciplinarity on a creative level.
For most musicians in the group, the format of the workshop—presenting artworks in a lecture form and having forum discussions on certain themes—was a little bit too abstract and academic. After several days, a few musicians stopped attending the workshop or showed up late. It seemed that attending the workshop became more and more a kind of obligation or an act of politeness.

If the workshop held in Manufactura’s Studio revealed the link formed between global contemporary art and Chinese sound art practices, the musicians’ participation in a live art festival indicated its connection to China’s contemporary arts. In New Millennium Center for Contemporary Arts, musicians were not required to participate in workshops or discussions. Instead, they gave a separate music show in the festival. I heard that musicians were “scheduled” to collaborate with performance artists in the festival. In Beijing, it is in fact not rare to have these kinds of contemporary art festivals or events with performance artists and musicians performing together. And a few experimental musicians in the group also practice performance art themselves, such as Li Zenghui and Feng Hao. Therefore, I expected to see something different than the usual mode of music performances in music venues, and was surprised when I learned that the collaboration was canceled during the festival. What I wondered, caused the dissatisfaction and cancelation? And did it reflect something more general about contemporary art in China?

New Millennium Center for Contemporary Art-Hu Nan (Changsha)

The 2nd “Changsha” Live Art Festival took place in an outdoor square owned by the non-profit art center titled Hu Nan: New Millennium Center for Contemporary Arts
along the lake Yuehu. The center is co-owned by Hu Nan Chengguo Cultural Communication Co, Ltd and the New Millennium Gallery in 798 Art District in Beijing. “ChangSha” Live Art Festival\(^3\) was initiated by China’s performance artists in 2008, and was intended to occur every two years. As described on its website, this festival is meant to be experimental, open, inclusive and pluralistic (see fig. 33). Its aim was to enhance cross-disciplinary communication to explore the boundaries of performance art. Two major media companies in Hu Nan province sponsored this year’s festival, and they broadcast the whole event live through a local channel.

“Cross-disciplinary” was a key word for this year’s festival. There was not much information on how the festival understood “cross-disciplinary,” and the organizers simply described its cross-disciplinarity as: primitive live performance art, staged mini midi improvisational music, and TV broadcasting.\(^4\) Curiously, Mini Midi’s experimental music was categorized as a staged art, contrasting to performance art as an original and primitive art. It was also confusing that public media was considered another discipline in dialogue with improvisational/experimental music and performance art. On the official website of the New Millennium Center for Contemporary Arts, the event was highlighted as “a free carnival art festival.”

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\(^3\) After the performance art piece “shooting accident” by Xiao Lu in the first China/Avant-Garde Exhibition in Beijing in 1989, performance art drew official attentions and was censored more than other kinds of art practice in China. To avoid censorship from both the state and the official art world, performance artists adopted the name live art as a coping strategy.

\(^4\) http://news.99ys.com/20100724/article--100724--45622_1.shtml
Yan Jun was not optimistic about this live art festival. He expected the sound system to be bad, and he remarked that his feedback noise never worked in an outdoor environment. But I was looking forward to it. After watching nights of musicians’ solos and group performances, I was expecting to see how sound artists collaborate with performance artists.
However, dissonances between sound artists and performance artists arose one after another even before the festival started. Yan Jun and Feng Hao decided not to collaborate with performance artists when we were booking flight tickets in Beijing. The day before the Festival, Beiou revealed that he was not prepared to perform with musicians in his solo Butoh dance scheduled to open the Mini Midi experimental music concert. He had made his own music.

We arrived at the art center around one o’clock in the afternoon. The festival began with the performance art section, during which a few staff members were setting up a special stage for the Mini Midi show in the evening. Most musicians stayed inside the art center, chatting, reading, or working on their laptops. The performance art section took place almost everywhere: outside and inside of the art center’s gallery, along the lakeshore, and in the gallery’s café. Except for Li Zenghui, who went to almost every performance art piece, few Mini Midi musicians went to see the performances. The first day’s performance art section ended around six o’clock in the evening. The organizer introduced the festival as well as artists to the audience, and he suggested that every artist go on stage. However, while the performance artists all went, Yan Jun and other musicians were reluctant to go. It was an embarrassing moment for the host and performance artists who were already on stage. Finally, the organizer suggested a picture be taken of all the artists, and urged Yan Jun and all the musicians to join in. They went and stood together, next to the group of performance artists.

The stage made especially for the Mini Midi music show was covered by a huge blue tent; it extended beyond the deck, suspended over the lake. The stage space was
larger than those in VOX Livehouse and Freedom House. Yan Jun suggested a whole group improvisation to open the show. Following this, Wang Ziheng performed a solo with his saxophone and his voice, during which he tore apart his T-shirt. Li Zenghui screamed and roared throughout his performance with Feng Hao. Li Jianhong stopped half way through his set after he had tried to communicate with the same person using hand gestures. The audience began to leave in the middle of the show, and by the end only a few people remained. I noticed that a few performance artists were among the audience throughout the entire show. But I felt tension throughout the night. I did not know why, but every musician seemed annoyed.

After the performance, I heard that there was not going to be another day of collaboration between performance artists and the Mini Midi musicians. Although Li Jianhong and Weiwei had showed their intention to collaborate the day before, they decided not to simply saying they were not interested. Li Zenghui and Wang Ziheng expressed their interest early on, but indicated that they were not coming the second day. Why?

I asked around and learned that musicians heard a rumor that performance artists were saying they did not understand what the musicians were doing and could not perform with this kind of music. Musicians were already upset with the sound person during the afternoon’s sound testing process. Li Jianhong complained that the sound person did not respond when he made requests during his performance, so he did not want to continue, and hence stopped in the middle. Li Zenghui seemed to be deeply troubled even after the show and I had rarely seen him so furious on stage before. When
I asked him how he felt about the show, he simply replied, “I felt nothing. I did not like those journalists with cameras running across the stage and making noises.” He was referring to the Butoh dance section right before the Mini Midi show. He was supposed to improvise with Beiou, but it did not happen. During Beiou’s butoh dance, the place was crowded not only with audience members, but also with flashing cameras, tripods, and video cameras. Journalists with cards hanging in front of their chests were running all over the stage trying to take pictures, invading Beiou’s performance space.

Later, Yan Jun told the festival organizer that the musicians were all leaving and would not come back in the following days. I noticed the awkward expression on the face of the organizer. After a few minutes, he sent a bus to take us back to Freedom House. The day after, Yan Jun and Feng Hao left for Beijing. Wang Ziheng and Li Zenghui went to the festival upon the request of He Zhiyao (who helped organize the “Changsha” live art festival on the experimental music part) to fill up the avant-garde theatre performance section, while no one else in the group showed interest to go. The rest of us went to a second-hand clothes market with Beiou and Houzi. At night, we all gathered at Freedom House, chatting while waiting for Li Zenghui and Wang Ziheng. He Zhiyao came back first, telling everyone that their mini play was successful. The two stayed outside until late into the night, discussing the new group they were forming after their first collaborative experimentation with mini plays combining performance art and sound.

The Mini Midi group dissolved after the Changsha Live Art festival. Everyone went back to everyday “routines.” Li Zenghui restarted his rehearsal for an avant-garde
play in Beijing, titled *The Tempted Woman*. Wang Ziheng went back home to continue his college summer break. Weiwei returned to her regular job at Higher Education Press in Beijing. Li Jianhong started preparing for his solo concert organized by Sub Jam at UCCA in 798 Art District.

**Making Sense of the “Dissonance”**

Although hardly anyone among the musicians discussed the festival after the show, I was left with questions about what led to the failure of the collaboration. I first researched in how the festival organizers conceived of and publicized this event. The Festival’s website reads, “It is an attempt to explore the potential possibilities between live art and the general public.” Having journalists and public media was a highlight for this year’s Live Art Festival. By using TV broadcasting and having journalists from all kinds of local newspapers and magazines, “the public” obviously referred not only to people present in the festival, but potentially everyone in the society with access to public media. However, without fostering a real dialogue between performance art and experimental music, the festival only presented to the public a hodgepodge of arts with auras of “contemporary,” “avant-garde,” and “experimental.” The festival did not create a space for communication between performance artists and sound artists. The organizers only informally asked whether musicians would like to collaborate with performance artists, and they probably expected that a cross-disciplinary collaboration would occur naturally.

Furthermore, the festival framed the Mini Midi experimental music as a staged performance. A special space was constructed for the Mini Midi show, which further
separated “the ear” from “the eye” and ignored (or did not even recognize) the cross-disciplinary nature of experimental music as art. The unprofessional sound person and the poor quality of the sound system also reflected the lack of attention and care the festival organizers gave to the sound part. The Mini Midi group was apparently affected by the attitude of the festival and the space provided for the musicians. No one really remembered who suggested the collaboration in the first place, and who made the comment that performance artists did not want to collaborate with these musicians and what it meant. However, in the end, there was no collaboration between performance artists and sound artists.

Finally, the Mini Midi group was also responsible for the uneventful collaboration. Based on his prior experience of working with performance artists on stage, Yan Jun rejected collaboration. His leading role in the group, directly or indirectly affected other members’ decisions. Moreover, during the performance art section, most musicians did not go to see the performance artists’ works. If the rumor was real that performance artists did not know what these experimental musicians were doing with sounds, the musicians’ attitude also suggests that they did not understand or appreciate performance art practices. The dissonance I perceived in the festival also makes me further reflect on the significance of touring, the limitation of formulating the kind of social bonds as in the utopian collective of Raying Temple, as well as a potential crisis in China’s contemporary art, with which I conclude this chapter.
“Touring” plays a role in creating cracks in the cocoon a group builds up. Touring on the road away from “home” is a good chance to put the state of utopia in motion, and test the worldviews of a collective (e.g. Raying Temple’s belief of “nothingness” and “true self”) against those of others. Through “touring” we recognize a self-absorbed aspect of subcultural spiritual pursuit. While spiritual experience may strengthen the subcultural bonding and generate collective creativity, it may also limit the collective’s ability to go outside of its own practice and recognize other kinds of values.

The Mini Midi experimental music tour failed to generate the kind of connection Yan Jun described as forming a “sonic mandala” (a connection that is spiritually invigorating; see discussion in chapter four). To realize such a connection requires certain spatial conditions, affective ambience, and also openness on the part of the artists and audience. In cities like Changsha and Wuhan, compared to Beijing, there were fewer people who had been exposed to sound art or noise music practices. They were not yet “cultivated” or “disciplined” as polite spectators or listeners for “disruptive” and “absurd” artistic acts. They were also less influenced by the affective ambience of a certain “cult culture.” Most of the time during the Mini Midi shows, many of the audience members either got irritated by the unfamiliarity of the sound, or watched the performances as spectacles.

Furthermore, while it is possible to acquire a sense of freedom-as-lifestyle superficially by purchasing and consuming certain music, freedom as a spirit of crossing disciplinary boundaries is only possible when practitioners are willing to take risks and
responsibilities. The unsuccessful contemporary art events revealed the gap between the discourse of contemporary art in China and the existence of conditions for actual practice. For me, the existing gap between the actual “cross-” or “inter-” disciplinary contemporary art practice and its discourse is a warning light for China’s contemporary art that requires serious reactions (which I hope to address in future research projects).

Georgina Born suggests that “the sensitivity to contradictory levels of experience in reception gives us a way of understanding ambivalence towards the musical object, and points towards a more complex account of aesthetic experience than hitherto” (Born 1991: 164). Therefore, my focus on the conflicts and contradictions that emerged during the Mini Midi tour was not to devalue existing art practices and musicians’ aesthetic or spiritual pursuits. Rather, through discussions of these contradictions I hope to suggest a critical understanding of China’s sound art culture, and more importantly, I want to call for practical ways to enhance experimental and cross-disciplinary art practices in China.

In the concluding chapter of this project, I discuss what sound art does beyond its symbolic, representative, or signifying functions. Through the non-symbolic aspect of sound art, I am able to turn to the affect of freedom that, I argue, does not exist on a discursive or signifying level, but on an everyday sensorial one. I maintain that sound art obtains a particular function in deterritorializing the sign of freedom and creating a free life to concretely feel one’s vitality and changeability.
CONCLUSION

AFFECTIVE LISTENING

To listen is to enter that spatiality by which, at the same time, I am penetrated, for it opens up in me as well as around me, and from me as well as toward me: it opens me inside me as well as outside, and it is through such a double, quadruple, or sextuple opening that a “self” can take place.

Jean-Luc Nancy “Listening”

Environment can generate feelings in us, but environment itself does not have any feelings. We ascribe feelings to environment. Therefore, there is no interaction between environment and humans on an emotional level. In ancient China, people played their Qin in mountains just to express their own emotions. The relation between environment and human is neither opposite nor equal. If the mood is the Buddha, then the environment is the Buddha. If the mood is everything, then the environment is everything.95

Li Jianhong, Sleeve notes of Empty Mountain

When we listen affectively, we listen with and to our bodies. The ear-becoming-body (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). When a sound does not carry any identifiable, decodable, or communicative message, it affects the listening body similar to the way touching works. Sound touches the listening body, causing concretely felt intensities before the mind knows. Affective listening is a commitment to forces, intensities and becoming. One listens to the “haecceities” of sound, which only later are reduced and signified as harmony, melody, or emotions (Cox 2011; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Massumi 2002).

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95 Quote translated from the Chinese text: 璋界与人从来就没有情感的互动。环境能激发人的情感。但环境本身不带有情感。环境的情感是人为的。所以环境和人之间不存在情感的互动。古人摇琴寄情山野，也只是借景抒情。从来就不存在人和环境之间的情感互动。环境和人的心境不是对立的，也不是平等的。如果心境是佛，那么环境就是佛。如果心境是众生，那么环境就是众生。Author’s translation, with reference to Weiwei’s translation on the sleeve notes.
In the concluding chapter, I outline the notion of affective listening as a mode of listening afforded by experimental music and sound art. Experimental music and sound art produce masses of sound—disassociated from harmonies, melodies, and pre-structuration—launching a direct attack on the body, and generating a felt experience, an affect, which only later is signified and recognized by the mind. Affective listening is a practice similar to what O’Sullivan describes as revealing “our own world seen without the spectacle of subjectivity” (2001: 128). Affective listening as a bodily felt experience is listening with and to the body. Drawing from Chinese experimental music and sound art practice, I suggest that affective listening functions as the practice of the self. The practice of the self is not so much the search for a self as placing a self (or selves) “in crisis” (Nancy 2002). This chapter restructures the question, “What are we to do with extra-linguistic or non-communicable experience?” and asks, “What does extra-linguistic or non-communicable experience do to us?”

I start with a discussion of the framework of signification that provides vocabularies and lenses used in both the field of sound studies and artists’ descriptions of their sound practices. Drawing from the work of Christoph Cox, I attempt to show the limitations of a framework of signification for capturing the affective dimension of sound and its impact on the listening body. I use the materialist model by Cox and the term sonic stroke from Meelberg to capture the affective nature of the sound of experimental music, noise and sound art (Cox 2010, 2011; Meelberg 2009). I argue that listening to these sounds is first of all a bodily experience, which is nonetheless often neglected and unattended to by various listening models. My notion of affective listening is developed
with reference to David Michael Levin’s model that outlines relations between stages of listening and the practice of self. However, I attempt to show that affective listening differs from Levin’s fourth stage of listening (just listening) insofar as it is more visceral and sometimes violent. In the last section, I envision relations between affective listening and the practice of the becoming self.

**Signification and Materialism**

I ground my discussion of affective listening in Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of haecceity, which suggests a non-personalized or anonymous individuation of things, nature, and individual human beings. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari write,

> There is a mode of individuation very different from that of a person, subject, thing, or substance. We reserve the name haecceity for it. A season, a winter, a summer, an hour, a date have a perfect individuality lacking nothing, even though this individuality is different from that of a thing or a subject. They are haecceities in the sense that they consist entirely of relations of movement and rest between molecules or particles, capacities to affect and be affected. (1987: 261)

The haecceity of “a person, subject, thing or substance” is not to be described or communicated but to be felt, as is the haecceity of a sound. The haecceity (or singularity as Deleuze and Guattari sometimes use interchangeably) of a sound, which seems so far to be mostly attributed to *timbre*, has puzzled theorists for a long time and only recently finds emphatic utterance in Jean-Luc Nancy’s book *Listening*. Ludwig Wittgenstein
called his experience of the timbre of sounds “a private experience,” meaning something that is not communicable (1999). Jules Lagneau, a late nineteenth century philosopher, also claimed, “…Intensity and timbre are immediate sensations, in which we can note complexity only by using external analysis. There is something ultimate there for consciousness.”96 (1926). For Nancy, timbre is “the resonance of sound: or sound itself” and “listening opens up in timbre” (2007: 39-43). However, the prevalent model used in social analysis of music is that of signification, and the majority of “analysis” has missed or been dismissive of the aspect of sound that Deleuze and Guattari call haecceity. In the following I will first discuss semiotics and musical signification

**Semiotics and Musical Signification**

Taking a semiotic approach, Roland Barthes groups sounds into three kinds: indices, signs, and shimmering of signifiers (1991). Correspondingly, he describes functions of listening as alert, deciphering and signifying. In response to a John Cage composition, Roland Barthes writes, “it is each sound one after the next that I listen to, not in its syntagmatic extension, but in its raw and as though vertical signifying…” (1991: 259). Barthes calls the rawness of sounds “the shimmering of signifiers.” He uses the verb signify to capture the active process during which one listens to the “raw” or the “shimmering” of sounds as signifiers. He stresses, “This phenomenon of shimmering is called signifying [significance], as distinct from signification” (1991: 256-259). To formulate listening as signifying, Barthes derives inspiration from the way psychoanalysts listen to their patients.

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96 Both Wittgenstein and Jules Lagneau’s comments on the timbre of sound in Jean-Luc Nancy’s book *Listening*, on page 41 and 83 (n33).
Barthes claims that listening in psychoanalysis revises the notion of listening (1991: 258). Psychoanalysts do not listen to indices or signs. Instead, they listen to the realm of unconsciousness of patients, or as Barthes brings it further, patients’ desire. Psychoanalysts listen to what is not narrated, and they enter an inter-subjective space with the speaker. Entering the other’s desire implies the possibility that one ultimately finds oneself there (Barthes 1991: 256). For Barthes, this kind of listening is active as well as creative. In the realm of the unconscious, there is no established sign system for the listener to recognize or decode. Instead, the listener participates in an endless process of producing meanings.

Barthes’ discussion of John Cage’s musical innovation is too brief to convey any in-depth message about how Barthes engages with Cage’s music. However, thinking about the fact that Barthes is putting methods of psychoanalysis together with Cage’s treatment of sounds, I speculate that Barthes may read Cage’s music as a psychoanalyst listens to the unconsciousness of his or her patients. We may say that for Barthes listening as signifying is interpretation and meaning making, which may never arrive at a definitive conclusion. It becomes dubious that within this semiotic framework how much Barthes could hear (or understand) Cage’s call, let sound be sound. In my opinion, Barthes’ approach fails to recognize the autonomy and the individuation (or the haecceity) of sound which requires no agency behind its becoming.

However, the semiotics approach has a wide impact in the study of music (Arkinson 2007; Born 1991; Demers 2010; Nattiez1990). While proposing the model of musical signification, Georgina Born applies Barthes’ semiotics to her discussion of the
non-linguistic domain of music as abiding a “denotative order” (a term from Barthes) (1991: 166). Born says,

> Musical sound in itself is alogogenic, completely unrelated to language, non-artefact, having no physical existence, and non-representational, referring in the first place to nothing other than the specific musical system or genre to which it is related. That is musical sound is a self-referential, aural abstraction. (166)

It is not rare to hear scholars calling musical sound abstract. Born’s comment that musical sound has “no physical existence” further suggests the lack of recognition in the value of the materiality of sound. Born’s project in constructing a theory of musical signification—focusing on the “multitexuality of music-as-culture”—is itself useful in investigating meanings of music in social, cultural, technological, and discursive domains (Born 1991: 159). Despite Born’s use of the overarching framework of signification that bypasses music-as-sound, she nonetheless brings to our attention the fragility of music in resisting interpretation and mediation. She says, “This peculiar degree of self-referentiality is why music may be considered a relatively empty sign,” and “because of music’s transparency as a form of signification, it offers little resistance to discursive invasion” (Born 1991: 166-167). I consider this an important comment in that it shows the urgency for a new theoretical framework and new vocabularies to not only prevent further discursive invasion but also to take account of the so-called “extras” of sound: the extra-symbolic, extra-textual, and the extra-discursive.
**A Sonic Materialist Model**

The immediate, non-repeatable, and visceral experience of sounds requires an alternative model to not only recognize these characteristics, but also take a thorough account of them. Christoph Cox proposes a model of sonic materialism, drawing from Nietzsche, Spinoza, Bergson, Deleuze and Guattari (Cox 2009; 2011). Cox argues that “a theory of sound enjoins us to abandon the idealist and humanist language of representation and signification that has characterized theoretical discourses on literature and the visual arts over the past half-century, and to reconceive aesthetic productions and reception via a materialist model of force, flow and capture.” He conveys that this model of materialism shares the ontology of what “Nietzsche calls ‘becoming’ and Deleuze describes as ‘haecceities’” (Cox 2011).

According to Cox, the model suggests “an ontological commitment” to forces, intensities, and becoming. It prevents “thinking in terms of representation and signification, and to draw distinctions between culture and nature, human and nonhuman, mind and matter, the symbolic and the real, the textual and the physical, the meaningful and the meaningless.” The model deals with, as Cox quotes Friedrich Kittler, “the waste or residue that neither the mirror of the imaginary nor the grid of the symbolic can catch: the physiological accidents and stochastic order of bodies” (2011: 153-157). In other words, the model captures the material world including frequency, vibration, physical time, and molecular movements. This model is what sound art practice calls for, using it, we could take better and serious account of the works and ideas of John Cage, Pierre Schaeffer, Edgard Varese, Alvin Lucier, Francisco Lopez, Max Neuhaus and so on. in a
Western context, and of many sound artists and musicians in Asian contexts, including China, Japan, and South Korea.

Instead of treating sound as an empty sign, Cox’s theory suggests that sound is an “anonymous flux” which acts, changes and affects (Cox 2011). This alternative lens enables us to think of sound not as a pure abstraction, an attribute of things or static objects, but forces and flows and intensities of sound molecules. Aden Evens has vividly captured the vibration of sound in his book *Sound Ideas*. 97

Vibrations do not disappear, but dissipate, echoing all the while, for energy is conserved. Every vibration, every sound, hangs in the air, in the room, in bodies. Sounds spread out, they become less and less contracted, they fuse, but they still remain, their energy of vibration moving the air and the walls in the room, making a noise that still tickles the strings of a violin playing weeks later (Evans 2005: 14).

Evens describes what the old Chinese proverb 余音绕梁，三日不绝 also suggests—after becoming inaudible, the vibrational affect of sound lingers. In English, the proverb is literally translated as: the remaining sounds coil around the beam, still vibrating after many days. To hear (or feel) the vibration of sounds, it requires a kind of sonic sensibility not limited to musicians. David Toop brings to our attention two historical figures who share similar sonic sensibility: “Charles Baggage’s Victorian-era theory that the air is a vast library, inscribed with the sonic impressions of every sound ever uttered,” and “Guglielmo Marconi’s conviction that sounds enjoy eternal if ever-
diminishing life in the earth’s atmosphere” (2010: 34). The eccentric Chinese experimental musician Wan Fan also likes to say that, once started, the vibration of sound never ends (Personal communications with the author).

There is also empirical research treating the vibrational and physical feature of sound corresponding to the above sensibility, which is sometimes considered poetic, mythical, or even romantic. Steve Goodman in his book *Sonic Warfare* categorizes sound, according to its physicality, as audible sound, infrasound (sounds with frequencies below 20Hz) and ultrasound (sounds with frequencies above 20kHz) (2010). Infrasound is tactile, and may cause nausea, and respiration inhibition. Ultrasound is neuro-affective, and may cause cavitations and heating of the body or tissue damage with prolonged exposure. Vincent Meelberg, drawing from David Hurton’s research, discusses the physical and biological impact of sound on a body. Meelberg points out that sound evokes chills that are autonomous reactions of the listener’s body, and he calls sounds that can elicit biological responses (chills) *sonic strokes* (2009). The above research suggests a shared insight that sonic vibration is a concretely felt experience on the body.

Sound meets the listening body in the way touching works. Touching involves a stretching or contraction of skins. A touch may be as violent as causing a bruise on the skin, or as soft as how a hair falls across one’s face. In each touch, something outside is turned inside, and something inside is turned outside. Each sound varies in its intensity and duration just like a touch or a stroke, and it thus affects the body in different ways and evokes various feelings or emotions. Music consists of “sonic strokes” that underlie
other musical characteristics including rhythm, harmony, and tempo. Meelberg wrote, “A sonic stroke is an impetus to thinking and reflection. It motivates the listener to reflect on the acoustic phenomena she is confronted with” (2009). Musical emotions, including sadness and happiness, “are the result of the detection of an intensity, an affect, and the interpretation of this intensity” (2009). And by arguing that “the body enframes formless information, such as the elements or raw material provided by perceptions, and turns it into apprehensible form,” Meelberg points out the crucial role the body plays in interpretation and experience (2009).

However, when bodily and mental framing function is blocked, many listeners (including sophisticated and musically educated listeners) would feel deeply annoyed and irritated. It is common to hear such irritation and frustration expressed especially during sound art concerts and shows. I would argue that this is what many current sound art works do—de-functioning or blocking habitual and familiar routes of bodily and mental framing. Or to put in a less negative way, this de-function or block function involves, as O’Sullivan quotes Henri Bergson, “a suspension of normal activity which in itself allows other ‘planes’ of reality to be perceivable (an opening up to the world beyond utilitarian interests)” (2001: 127).

When Kim-Cohen asks, “What are we to do with such experience?” there is an indication that the mind is unable to experience and encode the sound. Not to dodge Cohen’s question, I want to pose it in another way—what does the listening experience do? In what follows, I propose to call the kind of listening—the felt-experience that
occurs on the level of the body—*affective listening*. I will explore affective listening and its relation with the practice of the *self*.

**Affective Listening: Listening with and to the Body**

I would like to first introduce an interesting experiment Levin discussed in his book *The Listening Self*, which proves to be crucial to my formulation of affective listening. Levin uses empirical research to help illustrate his idea of “just listening,” identified as the fourth (or the final) stage in his listening model.

**Just Listening**

The empirical research involved testing the electroencephalography (EEG) responsiveness of Zen monks in Japan (Levin 1989: 225). Researchers exposed Zen monks with years of meditation practice to a single, repeated sound over a long period of time, and found that their EEG responsiveness remained constantly strong, alert, and fresh throughout. Levin (1989) reflects that “Whereas most of us would have found ourselves painfully bored, once we had become thoroughly familiar with the sound and habituated to its stimulation, and would eventually have blocked it out, not even hearing it, these monks continued to respond, to greet the sound, with an astonishing freshness and pleasure” (Levin 225).

For Levin, these Zen monks are in the state of “just listening,” which he described as “listening without getting entangled in the ego’s stories and preoccupations” (Levin 48-49). He claims that “just listening” or *hearkening* (a term he takes from Heidegger) is a mode or style of listening only practiced by very few people. In the listening model he constructs, Levin ranks “just listening” as the highest one among the four. For Levin,
“just listening” is to re-experience like an infant: to re-intertwine with the world. This is only possible when we become conscious of our particular and habitual way of focusing and channeling.

According to Levin, the way an infant listens characterizes the first stage of listening when “the infant lives in a bodily felt inherence in the openness of the sonorous matrix and hears with—hears through—the entire body. The infant’s ears are the body as a whole” (Levin 46). During the process of acculturation and socialization, the second and third stages of listening are developed when one simultaneously practices self-discipline, becomes ego-logical, and develops a sense of self. Levin suggests that most people will stop developing their listening skills at the third stage when listening helps to increase their capacity for compassion, sensuous and affective appreciation (1989).

Inspired by Zen teaching that an enlightened person has no attachment to one’s mind, Levin describes just listening as “a continuous felt contact with the sheer vibrancy of the field” (227). And he argues that this Zen sensibility is essentially what Heidegger calls “releasement” [Gelassenheit]. He explains that when we achieve an attitude of releasement, our perception is no longer in a grasping mode, and at the same time, objects stop functioning as the target of our attachments (attraction and aversion) (228). In addition, Levin claims that “just listening” is often “a playful listening, a listening which enjoys itself, a listening whose ultimate purpose is to be without a purpose” (231). The listening self in the fourth stage finds itself “inseparably intertwined with its object,” and one’s ego no longer structures listening.
Furthermore, “just listening” or listening with release suggests a kind of return. Levin calls it retrieval. If through the second and third stage, the listening subject gradually formulates an ego-logical self, and develops listening habits through conventions and socialization, the fourth stage is when one becomes conscious of one’s particular way of channeling and focusing. Retrieval refers to one’s efforts to re-experience the sonorous field like an infant and to re-intertwine with the world. To put it in Levin’s words:

This retrieval informs our listening, because what is retrieved is a bodily carried pre-understanding of our relationship to Being: a preconceptual experience which is not left behind when we grow out of infancy, and which continues to function, throughout our lives and at all times, as the opening situation of our hearing. (231)

Using vocabularies from phenomenology and psychology, and drawing on ideas mainly from Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, Levin outlines a sophisticated model of “just listening”—a mode he considers important for one to develop mature wisdom. Despite the significance of Levin’s model, I would argue that in the process of analysis he somehow lost the dimension of the body, which he gives a great value to. In fact, he only concretely discusses the relation between sound and the body in the first stage of listening. By ranking “just listening” as the last stage, as well as using the empirical research with Zen Monks, Levin has suspiciously made the mode of “just listening” a supreme “state of being” (I use Levin’s Heideggerian way of speaking here).
To repeat and emphasize, Levin’s “just listening” model lacks a body. While using Zen practice, especially Zen meditation to support his argument, Levin neglects the important role the physical and biological body plays in meditative practice. The empirical research with Japanese Zen monks also forgot to measure these monks’ breathing, which is central to mediation practice. In other words, neither the researchers nor Levin realizes that meditation is never a purely mental thing and that one’s bodily conditions—ways of breathing and relations with surroundings—are crucial elements that affect one’s brainwaves.

**Affective Listening**

To stay “strong, alert and fresh” does not only involve the releasement of the mind, but also the releasement of the body. Affective listening is first and foremost a bodily experience; sound acts first on the body, the nervous system. To describe what affective listening is like, I find a blog entry posted by the Chinese improvisational musician Li Jianhong particularly intriguing. He wrote:

> I did not expect to listen to the rain under the roof of the cloister. After a long time till now, I still remembered the rain- watching it marching towards my direction from the other side of the mountain, then hearing the rain washing over the trees, sensing the smell from the summer earth. The smoke from the burning incense in front of Mahavira Palace was not psychedelic, but when it met and mixed with the rain vapor, it started some visual and aural chemical actions. I heard the chanting sounds from inside of the palace covering the entire temple and mountains. I could not feel the contour of my ears. It became everywhere-
suspended above the mountains and the temple wrapped by the rain and chanting sounds. The ear listened with joy and ease. Facing the scene, I thought the best thing to do is to sleep. In fact, I did not consider there was a choice. I fell asleep. I know it was in fact very normal to encounter such a rain in the mountain. The rain, originally that of the universe, became my rain, because I existed that day. After that, I had a thought to make music with rain….

Compared to the experience four years ago, the rain this winter sounded quite realistic. The sounds of each raindrop falling onto the ground, the leaves, and the roof were clear and powerful. It seemed that each raindrop, each sound had their individual identity. At night, I could not see the raindrops. But I could vividly feel them right beside my hand. The realistic feeling assured me that this was the best moment to make music with them.98

Listening to the rain is an ordinary event in everyday life. What I find uncommon in this event is the connectivity formed between sounds and the listener, particularly the listener’s body embedded in that unique time-space. Imagine that ears become everywhere, and falling asleep becomes the body’s immediate response. It seems to me that Li not only listened to the rain but also felt into it with his body. While sleeping, his body opened up to the virtual sonic domain mixed with the rain sounds, chants from the temple, sounds and echoes from the mountains. The Qi of his body flowed, expanded, and vibrated in the cosmic sonic field.

98 A blog entry by Li Jianhong on 22 November 2010, titled Written before Shi’er Jing. Shi’er Jing is an album of environmental improvisational sound series created by Li Jianhong. http://lijianhong.blogcn.com/diary,35143407.shtml
This blog entry was later printed on the sleeve of Li’s newly released CD titled *Twelve Moods*. His encounter with the rain occurred in front of the Mahavira Palace in Faxijiang Temple in the city of *Hangzhou* in 2004. This encounter was also the inspiration for his later creation of the genre *environment improvisation*. *Twelve Moods* contains twelve tracks of Li’s improvisation with different examples of rain. In each track, the sounds of the rain differ in intensity, speed, and tempo. What is also worth mentioning is the titling of the twelve sound tracks of *Twelve Moods*. It is a stylistic choice, but also shows the artist’s sensitivity to the vitality and intensity of the rain.

1. * * * Rain
2. * Rain * * *
3. Curtains of Rain
4. * * * * Rain * *
5. When you sign about the loneliness of rain
6. Rain Cleaner
7. * * Rain *
8. Rain * * *
9. * Rain *
10. * * Rain
11. Sit by the night window, waiting for the wind and the rain
12. Hum, I’m watching the rain

Unlike traditional Zither or *Gu Qin* players who are also known for playing *in* and *with* the natural environment, Li does not imitate or represent rain sounds with his guitar in his music. When I listen to the record *Twelve Moods*, I also find it difficult to identify a sonic correspondence between rain sounds and the guitar sounds. In a few tracks, there are long periods of time when there are only rain sounds: the musician is listening to the rain while I am listening to it.
Li explained later in a sound art workshop held in the Art Institute of Chicago that he is not in an equal relation with environment sounds, and there is no one-to-one dialogue between him and nature (Wang 2011). Instead, the environment works together with his playing, as one. It suggests to me that Li is treating the environment and sounds as independent and autonomous individuals. It is not only up to him to decide whether it is an equal or unequal relation. Li intends to point out that in environment improvisation, there is no division between subjects (the musicians) and objects (the environment). Instead, there are two subjects or no subject at all. The environment is as active as the musician-listener. At the same time, the rain listens to itself as it listens to the guitar sounds and the musician.

Li’s listening is not interpretive but affective. As a musician, he does not listen to the relations among different sounds the way that traditional Western music education trains one to listen. Neither is he listening as a phenomenologist or a psychoanalyst; he does not listen to the rain as a signal of an alert, as carrying messages from higher beings, or as an unconscious field where his own desire will be explored. Listening does not function as a filter that picks up recognizable signals. Instead, listening is a channel through which passes the intensity of sounds. His listening body, including both his ears and all the other organs, is like a sponge, absorbing the sonic intensity and at the same time generating new sounds with his hands pressing, rubbing or plucking strings on his guitar. The Qi of his listening body is no different from the Qi of the mountain, the temple, and the rain, in the sense of their movements and rests.

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99 Li Jianhong lectured in a workshop about Chinese sound art and experimental music organized by the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in April 2011. In the workshop, he talked about his environment improvisation project initiated in 2008.
This experience, to some extent, resembles what Merleau-Ponty refers to when he says “I echo the vibration of the sound with my whole sensory being” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 234). However, I would argue that phenomenology falls short of answering what a body does rather than what a body is. Instead, tools and vocabularies from materialism, vitalism and Taoism would better capture the body as a becoming, and listening as a bodily felt experience. When treating the body as a becoming, and asking what a body does, the body of a person is no longer superior to that of an object or sound. Neither is the body inferior to the mind or the soul.

Lenses provided by materialism, vitalism and Taoism enable us to treat the body as open, fluid and capable to affect and be affected. Brian Massumi defines the body as virtual and actual with reference to ideas of Bergson, Spinoza, Deleuze and Guattari.

The body is immediately virtual as it is actual. The virtual, the pressing crowd of incipiencies and tendencies, is a realm of potential… the virtual is a lived paradox where what are normally opposites coexist, coalesce, and connect; where what cannot be experienced cannot but be felt… for out of the pressing crowd an individual action or expression will emerge and be registered consciously. One ‘wills’ it to emerge, to be qualified to take on sociolinguistic meaning, to enter linear action-reaction circuits, to become a content of one’s life—by dint of inhibition. (2002: 30-31)

The affect of the body, as Massumi claims, refers to this two sidedness of the virtual and the actual, the simultaneous participation of the virtual in the actual and the actual in the virtual, as one arises from and returns to the other (35). Massumi further
stresses, “it is the edge of virtual, where it leaks into actual, that counts. For that seeping edge is where potential, actually, is found” (43). On the plane of a sensing body, listening is synesthetic, with senses participating in each other (35). Affective listening occurs in the milieu of the body where the virtual and actual participate simultaneously. It demands a capacity of the body to re-invent ways of selection on the very “seeping edge.”

Meelberg shares a perception of the body similar to materialism when he argues that the body is a prerequisite for perceptions, and the body’s framing function makes it first and foremost a filter of formless information. He writes:

According to both Bergson and Hansen, the body, as the primary enframer of information, functions as a filter that selects perceptions relevant to the body. This is a subtractive act, as the body takes relevant percepts from the unfiltered flux of perceptions. It introduces specific constraints on what can amount to relevant aspects of a percept (relevant to the body, that is), and the body is always functioning as this enframer during each perception. (2009: 326)

With both Massumi and Meelberg’s insights, we could give a better account of Li Jianhong’s listening body that fell asleep in the rainy and misty sonorous field. Listening on the milieu of the body is synesthetic. The temperature, humidity, smell, light, surfaces of the wooden benches in the temple together with sounds, made listening simultaneously smelling, seeing, touching and feeling. The body releases itself from its framing function, overwhelmed in “the pressing crowd of incipiencies and tendencies.” Over the
seeping edge where the virtual leaks to the actual, there is an absence of the will. Li’s listening experience resembles, to a large extent, how one listens to experimental music and sound art works.

By reducing the body’s enframing function, blocking the customary or habitual way in which one’s body filters sonic information, sounds produced by contemporary sound practice open an alternative way of bodily and mental experience. On the surface, it might seem lazy for the body not to filter and for the mind not to interpret. While in actual practice, it proves to be much more difficult to have the body and the mind function in alternative ways—not to do what they habitually do. The practice involves a paradox: the body is in a relaxed mode in order not to enframe, but to achieve the relaxed mode requires efforts.

Although I may not be able to claim that affective listening is a mode accessible to anyone, especially if considering those who still insist that only a certain kind of music is music and turn away from unfamiliar sounds, I could at least argue that there are people who enjoy and benefit from affective listening. Musicians like Li Jianhong, and Yan Jun are examples of those who are satisfied with making sounds that do not signify and do not feel the need to make sense of sounds they make or hear. I also recall a live noise music show at 2 Kolegas bar in Beijing. The Swiss noise musician Niko, energized after his performance, told me that he did not feel sad or happy, but he felt. The feeling is unspeakable and indefinable, yet strong and intense. In an essay he wrote in 1938 (but published much later in 2000), John Cage talks about the function of the modern music he was involved with, and suggests that musical knowledge or being a musician does not
help with listening. In his opinion, listening to music and composing music are two different things. His proposal that “music need not be understood, but rather it must be heard” foregrounds his life-long artistic endeavor. In the following statement, he confirms the bodily dimension of listening and may also have suggested an answer to Kim-Cohen’s question, “what are we to do with the experience?”

What can we expect to be the result of attentive listening to music? I believe that listening to music makes for our lives another world, living in which, somehow, our hearts beat faster and a mysterious excitement fills us. And the natural flow of sounds which music is reassures us of order just as the sequence of the seasons and the regular alternation of night and day do. (Cage 1938: 19)

Before moving onto the last section in affective listening’s relation to the self, I want to make a few more brief points. First, affective listening, as a felt experience of the listening body, does not paralyze thinking. On the contrary, it opens a door to radically different ways of thinking. It does not require any kind of ranking, either of mental states or listening abilities. It suggests that sometimes knowledge is not power, but an obstacle to power. Secondly, although Li Jianhong’s story of listening involves elements such as a temple, Buddhist chants, and mountains that may appear exotic, ancient and mysterious, I would like to stress that affective listening is not primordial or primitive, and I hope my previous and following discussions guard against giving such an impression.
A Crisis of Self

The release of the body and mind are central to the cultivation of self, a shared concern among sound musicians in China, especially in Beijing. The cultivation of self does not carry a passive escapist sentiment, but suggests an ontological commitment in coping, connecting, and living freely in one’s contemporary situations. In Li Jianhong’s story, he suggests a sensibility aspiring to the state of “becoming one with nature.” At the same time, and more significantly, he argues that one cannot become one with the nature, and what ultimately would be achieved is that one creates something new out of such attempt of “becoming one with.” In other words, for Li Jianhong, the thing that we become one with is not nature, but the recognition of our selves that occur when engaging with the environment. For the improvisational noise music collective Raying Temple, the state of 真我 [a true/authentic self] is as important as the state of 虚无 [nothingness] to their musical practice and their way of life. For experimental musician Wang Fan, sound is a channel through which one finds the self, or to put in his words, “one wakes up from illusions.” The awakening sound Wang Fan searches for and creates is to enlighten deluded selves and to enable one to freely transverse constructed realities. Among the musicians and sound artists I interacted with in Beijing, Yan Jun (a writer, poet, curator, and a public intellectual) is probably the most articulate. In one of our interviews, Yan Jun conveyed in a somewhat poetic way that he likes those sounds that reduce him to the state of absolute aloneness. He explained,

You enter the state of aloneness through listening. Aloneness does not solve any problem immediately. It is only to make you exist by yourself. Many musicians
like to say that their music is to help listeners forget their loneliness. It is a shame, a drug. It is drinking poison to quench thirst. It is an illusion that we create to comfort ourselves. But that is the logic for those musicians. My logic is that we exist in the world alone. We have to make efforts to admit and face this fact. Only after its acceptance, we could be with other people who are also alone. We should not hide or pretend to forget this fact by hanging out with friends, eating, drinking together, or getting married. I am not against having parties with friends. But after those parties, you go back home by yourself. Even if you go back with your partner, before falling asleep, there is a moment of absolute aloneness. For many people, this moment is too short to be noticed. But I must enlarge this moment, and make it longer, because only in this moment could I clearly feel and understand my existence. This moment, for me, is individual liberation. (personal communication with the author)

For Yan Jun, those unstable, sometimes monotonous or piercing sounds he makes with his feedback system deconstruct established ways of organizing sounds. Those are sounds with nothing for either the mind or the body to hold on to. Listening to these sounds is a process of detaching oneself from familiarities and reaching “the moment” of absolute aloneness. In this process, one’s social self, objectified self, and imagined self are deconstructed.

The above colloquial and poetic ways of describing the listening self as “self-in-aloneness,” “awakening self,” “self-at-ease,” reveals an instinctually felt or intellectually

100 A Chinese saying: 饮鸩止渴.
101 Interview with the author, July 13, 2010, Beijing. Author’s translation.
constructed relation between listening and the self. It seems to me that their ideas of self are similar to what the self means in the Chinese term 自在 [spontaneous becoming or self-existing]—a widely used term in Chinese culture originally coming from Buddhism. 自在 evokes the image of a Taoist who wanders across worlds, “[flying] like Kun-peng thousands of miles up in the air and [being] carefree like little birds easing down to the field,” “being perfectly one with heaven and earth,” and “being heaven and earth” (Shang 2006: 131). The ideal is to exist in Tao, the chaos, the milieu of milieus, where the self ultimately becomes the Tao. The ultimate goal for the practice of 自在 [spontaneous becoming or self-existing] is to exist, rather than self-exist. The self is a construction, an illusion.

The Taoist idea of 自在 [spontaneous becoming or self-existing], which is also shared by Chan Buddhism, comes close to Jean-Luc Nancy’s conception of the self accessible through listening. “A self is nothing other than a form or function of referral: a self is made of a relationship to self, or of a presence to self, which is nothing other than the mutual referral between a perceptible individuation and an intelligible identity” (Nancy 2007: 8-9). As Nancy further points out, “to be listening will always, then, be to be straining toward or in an approach to the self (one should say, in a pathological manner, a fit of self: isn’t [sonorous] sense first of all, every time, a crisis of self?)” (9). The self as Nancy discusses here in listening is not to be mistaken with the socially objectified “me” or the self of the other. Listening is a unique perception through which we work on “the relationship in self” (12). He writes,
Listening—the opening stretched toward the register of the sonorous, then to its musical amplification and composition—can and must appear to us not as a metaphor for access to self, but as the reality of this access, a reality consequently indissociably “mine” and “other,” “singular” and “plural,” as much as it is “material” and “spiritual” and “signifying” and “a-signifying.” (12)

This way of description may sound similar to Levin’s psychological-phenomenological description of the “intertwining” of the self and objects in the stage of “just listening.” However, it is not the same because for Nancy listening does not operate with a phenomenological intentionality. Levin’s “just listening” has such an intentionality when the listening self “wills” a retrieval, when it already knows what the listening self is going to give away or reduce to. This is what Nancy (2007) means when he comments on Heideggerian forgetting of being: this occurs to the very extent that he does not concentrate his ear on musical resonance but rather converts it ahead of time into the object of an intention that configures it” (20). Nancy emphasizes the importance of distinguishing the listening self from a phenomenological one:

The subject of the listening or the subject who is listening (but also the one who is “subject to listening” in the sense that one can be “subject to” unease, an ailment, or a crisis) is not a phenomenological subject. This means that he is not a philosophical subject, and finally, he is perhaps no subject at all, except as the place of resonance, of its infinite tension and
rebound, the amplitude of sonorous deployment and the slightness of its simultaneous redeployment…(Nancy 2007: 22)

By describing listening as an access to the self, Nancy does not suggest a sense of going back to the Oedipal stage, a primordial one when the self is intertwined with objects. The subject or a self does not precede sound. Sound does not manifest a subject whatever form it is—infant-like or sage-like. Nancy does not stress the harmony of self and the other in listening’s access to a self. Rather, there is often a sense of rupture, pressure, and urgency in this access. Sound evokes a self by its strokes, its touches, and pressures.

“Evocation: a call and, in the call, breath, exhalation, inspiration and expiration” (Nancy 2007: 20).

The sonorous invokes infinite folds of selves. The presence of sound—sonorous presence as Nancy calls it—is made of “a complex of returns.” “Sound essentially comes and expands, or is deferred and transferred” (13). Sound is always with “return and encounter” (16). However, it is less the sense of “a retrieval [Wiederholung]” as Levin suggests. For Nancy, the presence of sound is “a present in waves on a swell, not in a point on a line; it is a time that opens up, that is hollowed out, that is enlarged or ramified, that envelops or separates, that becomes or is turned into a loop, that stretches out or contracts, and so on” (13). Instead, the crisis of self—a form of referral or “the resonance of a return”—could be better understood through Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “the refrain.”
For Deleuze and Guattari, the refrain does not have successions, but simultaneous dimensions or aspects. A birdsong refrains a territory, and it also generates amorous or cosmic invasions. In Deleuze and Guattari’s words,

…The refrain has all three aspects, it makes them simultaneous or mixes them: sometimes, sometimes, sometimes. Sometimes chaos is an immense black hole in which one endeavors to fix a fragile point as a center. Sometimes one organizes around that point a calm and stable ‘pace’ (rather than a norm): the black hole has become a home. Sometimes one grafts onto that pace a breakaway from the black hole.

(Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 312)

Affective listening is to enter territories of the refrain with its multiple modalities as an abode and chaos. A subject, or a swath of subjects, emerges when the listening self is thrown over to the edge of a familiar tone (or home), onto another path, into a black hole. It is in this sense Nancy says that to be listening is always to be straining toward a crisis of self (9). It is also why for Nancy listening always carries a sense of cruelty to the body and the self. It is sonorous or acoustic penetration. “To listen is to enter that spatiality by which, at the same time, I am penetrated, for it opens up in me as well as around me, and from me as well as toward me” (Nancy 2007: 14).

Sound entails an attack while it shelters. We often see people covering their ears at a live experimental music or noise music concert. Compared to Levin’s model of “just listening,” Nancy’s listening is more visceral and more intense: intensity of pain; pain waves (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 152). If Levin’s model represents a Western middle
class or bourgeois understanding of Buddhism (Zen in Japan and Chan in China) as serene, peaceful, pleasant and harmonious, Nancy’s model uncovers the cruelty, violence, and disharmony in other realities of Buddhism: enlightenment follows a heavy hit on the head. Kill the Buddha.

Affective listening is a way through which one makes oneself towards Body without Organs (BwO)—the malleable and the virtual body, the plane of immanence, the plane of consistency, the Tao (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 154-157). To be 自在 [spontaneous becoming or self-existing], the self has to transform as the Tao. The Tao is the chaos, the milieu of milieus. “Tao, a field of immanence in which desire lacks nothing and therefore cannot be linked to any external or transcendent criterion” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 157). Deleuze and Guattari say, “The BwO is what remains when you take everything away. What you take away is precisely the phantasy, and significations as a whole” (151). Affective listening is neither authentic nor inauthentic (authenticity when used as a backward-looking ideology); masses and intensities of a BwO are neither negative nor positive.

Affective listening is where self-reinvention and self-transformation occurs, and where the self ventures from home. If the chief modus operandi of art, as O’Sullivan says, is to transform “our sense of our ‘selves’ and our notion of our world” (2001:128), affective listening is no doubt an art event by itself.

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