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Electronic on the Ground: Imagining Community and Crafting Culture in Beijing's Electronic Music Scene

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Electronic on the Ground: Imagining Community and Crafting Culture in Beijing's Electronic
Music Scene

Juliet Liu

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Prerequisite for Honors
in Anthropology
under the advisement of Justin Armstrong

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introduction

Certain songs have the power to transport me back to my childhood within seconds. When I listen to them it's like I'm in the backseat of my family's black Nissan Pathfinder again, dozing off on a drive home from the grocery store or ballet practice. Really, the only common thread uniting these songs is that my parents, two immigrants who moved to Oregon from northern China during the 1980s, think they sound nice. I grew up listening to Lionel Richie, Creedence Clearwater Revival, and one Chinese ballad in particular, titled "My Chinese Heart" by Zhang Ming Min.

While I didn't understand the intensely patriotic Mandarin lyrics of Zhang Ming Min's 1982 love letter to China growing up, I heard the song so many times that I memorized the flow of the lines without their attached meanings. I could confidently sing the chorus and even mimic the orchestral ensemble's dramatic flourishes, much to my family's amusement at Chinese New Year dinners. My eight year-old ears really heard no difference between the soft crooning of the Carpenters, the snarled lip of John Fogerty, and the spirited belting of Zhang Ming Min. These were just sounds that filled me with a comfortable sense of home and safety. In fact, it wasn't until the summer of 2015 that I dug deeper into the story behind "My Chinese Heart" and, in doing so, discovered my abiding interest contemporary Chinese music culture.

During the summer of 2015, I worked as an editorial intern at a music magazine called The FADER. A print and online publication, The FADER's coverage attempts to locate and celebrate hard-to-define pockets of "underground" music, as well as the lifestyles and cultures that surround them. The FADER rarely covers mainstream pop or rock; instead they focus heavily on up-and-coming experimental artists and all manner of hip-hop, rap, and electronic. Every morning at their one-floor office in the Flatiron District of New York, I settled into a routine of drinking a cup of iced coffee while scrolling through the handful of premiere assignments that The FADER's managing editor, Ruth, sent to my email.

Premiere posts decorate The FADER's homepage like a curated bowl of welcome candies set on a hotel bell desk: every day, writers publish these bite-sized blog posts to debut new material from Australian techno duos to Canadian-by-way-of-Caribbean rappers. Each post is tagged with a yellow "PREMIERE" accent for easy spotting online. Premieres are arranged between editors, public relations agents, and artists themselves. In exchange for a short blog post and social media publicity, artists agree to give The FADER exclusive coverage of a new song, video, or project for a set amount of time—usually half a business day. Premiere posts feature information that readers cannot get from other blogs, for example a quote from the artist or information on a new release. Every day, I would write between one and three of these posts. Ruth forwarded me a press kit and a private link to the song or video, and then I would have under an hour to research the music, write about the project, and send over a draft for edits and publication. Since I was a first-time intern and eager to take on every project possible, my reply to Ruth's daily instant message asking "Juliet, interested in premiering this?" was always yes.

The FADER's editorial team has a special interest in premiering music from a wide range of artists and genres around the globe; this position was impressed upon me early during my internship, and I often spent time familiarizing myself with musical genres and communities in preparation for a post. In order to write one of my first premiere posts for a Peruvian DJ named Tribilin Sound, I spent close to an hour reading about the rhythmic technicalities of cumbia and its electronic incarnation, tecnocumbia. I had to, in order to feel comfortable writing with any authority on the new track. After about a month of repeating this process every day and applying it to Dutch electronic and traditional Greek processions, I wondered why I had not yet had the chance to premiere a track or project coming out of mainland China.

One day I used my lunch break to write about Chinese electronic music. After combing through several Tumblr blogs devoted to Asian and Asian-American music, I found Dead J. Dead J used to be the recording alias of Shao Yanpeng, a Beijing-based electronic musician who now

releases music under his last name, Shao. My first exposure to just one electronic artist in Beijing propelled me deep into a world of Chinese electronic music and underground culture.

Up until that point, the only Chinese music I knew of was “My Chinese Heart” and other nameless power ballads contained within the jewel cases in my dad’s glove compartment or CD wallet. After I learned about Shao Yanpeng and began tracking contemporary Chinese music culture, I felt the need—probably driven by my own connections to my Chinese heritage—to make up for lost time. My personal project became a mission to learn about the history of Chinese music: how did we get from Zhang Ming Min performing his patriotic falsetto during national New Year’s television programs to Shao Yanpeng playing his minimal electronic in smoky, dim nightclubs? I quickly dove into a personal project of researching the historical antecedents and cultural circumstances that precipitated the contemporary Chinese electronic music streaming on my Soundcloud app.

Mao Zedong’s death and the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1977 marked a turning point in China’s economy and, in turn, its musical and artistic culture. Amidst the fraught political environment that followed, Deng Xiaoping returned to the arena of Chinese politics to set in place a series of sweeping, radical economic reforms and open-door policies designed to “make up for the deficiencies” of the Chinese economy and culture as it existed immediately following Mao’s death. Deng Xiaoping’s policies led to a rapid increase in China’s commercial and intellectual activity, specifically within urban centers like Beijing.

Alongside economic and trade reforms, Deng attempted to rejuvenate the intellectual currents of China by remodeling the university entrance exam system to be based on academic merit rather than the socioeconomic status of one’s family. As a result, many more young people from different backgrounds and areas of China began attending university and populating urban centers like Beijing and Shanghai. The growth of young, educated populations in China’s metropolitan areas combined with China’s new openness to trade and outside influence led to

increased political awareness and organization among students—this environment bred the sentiment that culminated in the student-led, pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square on June 4th, 1989 (Tisdell 2008).

It was in this energetic, rapidly changing sociopolitical environment that the beginnings of a countercultural ethos began to crystallize during the 1990s. “This context of commercialization and globalization facilitated the rebirth of Chinese rock,” argues anthropologist Jeroen de Kloet, whose work is embedded in contemporary Chinese pop music (Kloet 2010). Armed with a slew of cultural references from the West, a subset of young educated people in Beijing began forging new modes of creating and sharing art, which culminated in a dynamic countercultural ethos that scholars refer to as the *dakou* generation. Writers of Chinese youth and music culture trace the rejuvenation of rock music and countercultural ethos to the import of illegal CDs—*dakou dai*—from the West during the mid-1990s.

In Mandarin, *da* can mean “hit,” “break,” or “strike” among other things, while *kou* might stand for “door,” “entrance,” or “opening” depending on vocal inflection. In any case, *dakou* refers to the intentionally damaged CDs and tapes that circulate in urban China’s bustling black market. When Western music label executives decide to recycle surplus product, they cut the CDs and cassettes in an attempt to render them unsellable. However, generally only the last part of a cut CD is lost when placed inside a disc player. *Dakou* CDs found a niche market in urban China among musicians and audiences with tastes ranging from mainstream Chinese to alternative Western rock music. Artists ranging from Joy Division to Atari Teenage Riot and The Pet Shop Boys broke onto the Chinese scene via these gashed but still listenable products (Kloet 2010). The burgeoning supply of music from outside of China proved extremely fertile ground for a revived urban rock scene in China. *Dakou* CD transcended its status as an object and took on life as a symbol. Beyond being the physical media through which alternative Western rock acts penetrated the Beijing scene, these damaged and smuggled albums became a representative token of the

cultural, social, and political potentialities of sound beginning to emerge in the urban Chinese context.

Despite living in an age of torrented music, streaming services, and cloud-based music exchange, the individuals I spoke to still figured the *dakou* phenomenon into their personal experiences of electronic music in Beijing. Shao Yanpeng grew up as a music fan and producer by listening to Radiohead and Smashing Pumpkins *dakou* CDs. Liu Yiwei, a techno DJ and founder of the record label Prajnasonics, describes a similar trajectory as a rock fan-turned-electronic producer. Indeed, my exploration of electronic music in Beijing necessitates an understanding of the *dakou* generation because many individuals embedded in the nascent electronic scene in Beijing grew up on these cut CDs. Several individuals I spoke to mentioned that they and many of their peers began as rock or punk-rock musicians, and then sought out new avenues and technologies of musical expression through producing their own music and DJing events.

The electronic music scene in the People's Republic of China (PRC) is relatively young. My interlocutors repeatedly cited the nascence of the scene as something both exciting and troubling to people attempting to sustain their livelihoods in music. Jeroen Groenewegen-Lau, an academic specializing in Chinese media culture, locates the beginnings of sound art and electronic music in the PRC to the year 2003. That year, during the historic four-day Sounding Beijing Festival organized by artist Yao Dajuin, experimental artists and musicians involved in sound art and electronic music played alongside artists from outside China for the first time (Groenewegen-Lau 2013). When I spoke with Helen Feng, lead singer of Nova Heart, former radio show host, and founder of Fake Music Media, an artist services company, she said that artists in certain pockets of Beijing culture tend to “move with the scene and fashion,” which was part of her theory on why many rock musicians are now making electronic music.

Indeed, Groenewegen-Lau argues that “in the early 2000s, a substantial number of Beijing rock musicians became aware of and even frustrated with rock music's limitations and looked for

alternatives” (Groenewegen-Lau 2013). Both my personal and anthropological interest in underground Beijing music culture stem from electronic music being a relatively young and dynamic scene in mainland China. Electronic music is an especially interesting form to investigate from an anthropological standpoint, because it assumes a fusing of online and offline elements not only in its production and dissemination but also in the formation and crystallization of social worlds around the music itself. As a cultural and technological form, electronic music is at once an “extremely obvious corollary to [musical production]” and an “utterly alluring [concept] that takes and holds the attention” (Powell 1966).

While it makes sense to theorize electronic music culture within a context of global connectedness, shared cultural references, and the proliferation of virtual communities, I am interested in the enduring physicality and locality of Beijing’s electronic music. That is to say, although it’s true electronic producers often have the special privilege of neatly packaging their music files into a .zip file and sending it to collaborators without ever meeting them in person, I am interested in how, under these specific and complex systems of globalization, there is special value in understanding how things are made local. I am interested in complicating the idea that, just because electronic music exists in a moment of digitalization and globalization, discussions of physical space, embodied performance, analog technologies, and local flows of culture are irrelevant.

An illustration of how electronic music seems to be both a product of and generator of global connection and blended cultural references is the story of Onra, a producer whose background is a testament to blending culture. Born Arnaud Bernard in Germany to French parents and with Vietnamese heritage on his father’s side, Onra’s work exemplifies how the Internet, global connections, and multifaceted representations of identity figure into the production of electronic music and its surrounding culture. In 2006, Bernard traveled to Asia for the first time in his life to vacation in Vietnam. “Everywhere I go, I’m always trying to buy

records,” Bernard explains in a 2015 interview with Red Bull Music Academy. Bernard enlisted the help of a taxi driver in Vietnam to locate some secluded second hand shops where he could peruse music. The records had little identifying information that Bernard could decipher, and so he randomly chose and bought 40 records.

When Bernard returned to France, he randomly plucked his new vinyls out and put them on the turntable. “I was like, ‘Whoa, wait a minute, I can do something with this,’” Bernard recalls. Using his MPC (music production controller) instrument, Bernard crafted an album, *Chinoiseries*, out of these randomly collected sounds. Since his initial trip to Vietnam, Bernard’s Chinese records collection has increased tenfold; since the original release of *Chinoiseries*, Bernard has released two additional iterations. *Onra* is an interesting example not only because of his global background as a musician and person, but because of how Chineseness and Chinese sounds are represented in *Chinoiseries*.

Another example of experimental music that draws on Chinese influences and therefore piques my interest in exploring Chinese music is New York-by-way-of-Kuwait producer Fatima Al Qadiri’s 2014 album *Asiatisch*. In an interview with Pitchfork, Al Qadiri describes the influences behind the China-inspired album, on which Helen Feng makes an appearance:

I wanted to make a record based on this idea of the presence of Asian motifs in Western music, whether it’s in rap, classical, TV, cartoons. I feel like I’ve been listening to and soaking in these Asian motifs in Western music for a long time, so this record is like a virtual road trip through “imagined China.” It’s not the real China. I’ve never been to China. I only know what the West is telling me about China (Pitchfork 2014).

Here, Al Qadiri is pointing at the highly constructed and imagined notion of “Chineseness” in the Western cultural landscape. In interviews, Al Qadiri reveals her consciousness of how much of Chinese imagery in both mainstream and underground Western culture maintains an imagined, colonial sheen. Listening to Al Qadiri’s album and reading increasing blog coverage of Chinese music, I became extremely interested in exploring this topic, which seems to be gaining more recognition and buzz from music journalists in the West, from an anthropological angle.

When I spoke with her, Helen was wary of the slant of pieces that painted artists and Chinese government as perpetually head-to-head, when in reality the situation is at once more nuanced and less of an everyday concern. Through my ethnographic explorations, I am interested in Chinese people and the electronic music they make. How do musicians negotiate Chineseness amidst forces of globalization and lingering Orientalism? How do social communities in China form around the production and enjoyment of electronic music in the underground culture context? What is the significance and importance of an anthropological perspective in an increasingly global world, where cultural references can become as blended as Onra's small example shows?

Thus, my interest in Chinese music comes largely from my identity both as an avid consumer of music and the culture that comes with it as well as a Chinese American with a sense of connection to China through how I was brought up. My interest in Chinese music is a result of my involvement with producing content for one of these publications, but it also stems from a lifelong awareness of the duality of my identity, and a curiosity and almost longing to understand the culture that my parents come from, and that I was raised with but not within. My work is its own exercise in bridging the gaps of geography with imagined community and the powers of globalization.

Electronic music is an interesting site for ethnographic exploration because people tend to think of it as something that can be reproduced almost perfectly so that any local flavor goes away or doesn't matter. However, I am interested in how electronic music is actually lifted from its origins in the west and re-made in the Chinese context. In light of our current fixation on the virtual and digital, and perhaps counterintuitively to the study of *electronic* music, I am interested in what we can learn about a type of music and the people who make it on a local, embodied, everyday level. While globalization and music are often theorized in broad strokes, my ethnographic work reveals the more quotidian and nuanced ways that the global becomes local

and vice versa. I focus on the ways that electronic music culture, and more broadly speaking underground culture, are made and re-made in local contexts for particular audiences at particular times.

In Chapter 1, I discuss my site, the scope of my project, and my unique positionality as a Chinese American conducting ethnography in China; I describe the duality of my identity in a place where I am in between familiar and unfamiliar perspectives.

Chapter 2 introduces the theoretical framework of my project: I unravel the intertwined phenomena of globalization, place, modernity, and the avant-garde to provide a dynamic yet structured foundation upon which my ethnographic exploration of electronic music and underground music culture in Beijing builds. I primarily argue for a change in how we understand those aforementioned concepts; since they all originated in the intellectual canon of the so-called West, I question and attempt to reconcile how we can still use these powerful analytical frameworks and cultural lenses in a specific, nuanced way. Drawing on literature as well as my interactions in the field, I propose several ways by which we can adjust our thinking around these phenomena so that they are more applicable to the Chinese context.

Chapter 3 departs from the reflective, methodological, and theoretical realms of the first two chapters and into the “imponderabilia of everyday life,” indeed into the fabric of life for the electronic artists and other individuals involved in the scene. Specifically I focus on the crafting of artistic identities and musical tastes.

In Chapter 4, I focus on the social scene of electronic music enclaves to better understand how a desire to return to analog and non-electronic dynamics illustrate the local authenticity of Beijing’s scene; I also further explore the formation of a local imagined community through the collective construction of a shared history.

chapter one:
in the field

Li Yaxiong was already waiting for us when we arrived at Beijing Wuzi University the day after New Year's. Sitting up and rubbing the sleep from my eyes in the backseat of my uncle's gray sedan, I noticed that not much had changed about her since I last saw her in 2008 besides the color of her hair. Once jet black and wavy, it is now cropped and light gray. Bundled up in a red and white athletic parka and gently bouncing on her Reebok-clad feet, Li Yaxiong threw her arms up when she saw us and ran toward our car, causing a bit of tea to drip out of the wide-mouth plastic thermos she was drinking out of. Even from inside the car, I could hear her muffled voice: "JULIE!" she shouted. Smiling, I quickly opened the door to go greet her once we turned into a parking circle beyond the school's security gates.

Since I was three, I've known this woman as Grandma Li. She was my father's English professor during his first year of college at Hebei University; at sixteen he was the youngest student in the class, and he quickly became Grandma Li's favorite. She is now close enough to call family; we send Grandma Li English audiobooks (reading hurts her eyes, but she wants to keep her English skills up to date) and diabetes supplements from Costco in the mail, and are sure to visit her whenever we visit China as a family. That day, my mother's older sister and her husband had driven me two hours from Luanping, a little town surrounded by mountains in Hebei Province, to Wuzi University, where Grandma Li is retired with her husband (known as Grandpa Zhang to me).

Located about forty minutes outside central Beijing in Tongzhou Province, Wuzi University is a small undergraduate business school with around 8,000 students. Grandma Li was a founding member of Wuzi's relatively new English Language department, and Grandpa Zhang was President of the University for five years before he retired. Smiling and joking between bites of *baozi*, small pork buns, during one of our breakfasts together, Grandma Li called herself "a campus celebrity." This statement wasn't entirely made in jest. During our post-dinner walks — "For healthy digestion!" Grandma Li would say as she slipped her arm through the crook of

mine—we'd stop multiple times so that Grandma could greet former students, colleagues, and, on one occasion, the front desk manager of the school's faculty recreation center. One day, when I discovered that I'd misplaced my subway pass but had to make an interview on the other side of Beijing, Grandma Li took my hand and we ran over to the ground floor offices of the nearest academic building. Peering through the window to confirm that she knew the person inside, she breathlessly explained that I needed a subway pass, urgently. Within moments she stuck her arm in the window and a middle-aged male professor handed her a pass attached to a lanyard. She said, grinning, "No matter, he owed me one."

A few weeks prior to my arrival in China, Grandma Li called my father to let him know that she'd arranged housing for my stay in Beijing. Wuzi University has a small hotel on campus for family and visitors passing through, and Grandma Li had pulled some strings within the college community to reserve a room for me at a discounted rate. She gave the receptionist who worked the late night shift a large bag of coarse yellow millet and in exchange asked her to keep a special eye on me if I ever came back late at night. Figuring my time in Beijing would be safer and more efficient if I traveled with a peer my age, Grandma Li also scoped out the undergraduate community and enlisted a 23 year-old student named Peng Xiaoxing to help me navigate Beijing and also gain a closer proximity to the everyday experiences of young Chinese people in Beijing.

Xiaoxing, whose nickname is Star, is a senior studying English translation at Wuzi University. While I visited in mid-January, Star was busy preparing for a series of written and oral exams. In order to graduate, Star's department chairs requested that she spend a certain number of hours applying her translation skills in a setting outside of university. Grandma Li assured Star that helping me translate my ethnographic notes would count toward those hours. So from the start, Star and I had a type of symbiotic relationship in which she taught me how to navigate Beijing and I helped her fulfill those requirements. On our long subway journeys to different neighborhoods in Beijing, I read Star's translated paragraphs on topics ranging from Bob Dylan

to a sample list of hotel amenities and gave her my native speaker's perspective on her translational choices. After interviews, I often texted Star asking for help translating some of the more complex or philosophical answers I received to my open-ended ethnographic questions.

Apart from being a key linguistic link during my face-to-face interactions, Star also helped me acclimate to and understand the unique minutiae of Beijing life. Clifford Geertz writes of culture as “webs of significance”; Star showed me some significant points of contemporary youth culture in Beijing through objects and small practices that Geertz would argue are ripe with meaning. For example, on my second night in Beijing, Star brought me to a 7-Eleven near the Dongzhimen subway stop. I was thirsty after having conducted a long ethnographic interview, and she needed a new pack of 3M surgical masks that she and many other Chinese citizens use to combat the adverse health effects of smog and pollution in Beijing. On our walk back to the subway that would take us back to Wuzi, Star handed me one of the new masks and told me to hang on to it.

Normally, Star and I would meet in the afternoon to travel to an ethnographic interview or to meet her friends for a meal. Whether we were hunched over tiny paper bags of spicy chicken wings in a cramped Gulou District shop or laying slabs of meat onto white-hot grills at a barbecue buffet in one of many new, sprawling shopping malls cropping up around the city, my new Chinese acquaintances and I were endlessly entertained by comparing life in the United States to life in Beijing. We talked about everything from spending habits—Taobao, the online marketplace similar to Amazon, is enticingly convenient and a good place to purchase fake Western brands like Supreme and Bathing Ape—to social culture. While I explained the complexities of the Wellesley senate bus, Star and her friend Candace, a native Beijinger, walked me through the difficulties of going out for drinks or a late show when their dorms become locked from the outside at 11 PM every night (the solution is to book a cheap bed in a youth hostel and stay overnight). Underlying my interactions with Star and her friends was a conscious recognition of

the space between Americanness and Chineseness, in particular the cultural and geographical distance between Chinese Americans and young people born and raised in China. This gap, produced by transnational flows of people and culture, the widening of the global labor market, and the racialization of Chinese individuals along national borders, was something that we momentarily bridged during our time together.

My parents emigrated to the United States from different small towns in Northern China in the 1980s to pursue graduate education and start a family. My father is a college English professor at a community college in New York, while my mom works in corporate tax in Manhattan. While my first language is English, I grew up learning and speaking conversational Mandarin. My family likes to joke that we speak “Chinglish”; our household is abuzz with blended Mandarin-English phrases. For example, “Can you check the *chouti* (drawer) for a pair of scissors?” Throughout elementary and middle school, I attended Chinese language classes every Sunday at a local college campus along with dozens of other Chinese American children in my area. Since I was three, my family has traveled to China three times to visit family. So while I am a U.S. citizen born and raised, I have also maintained a close imagined relationship with Chinese customs and language through my parents.

While conducting fieldwork in Beijing, my unique positionality as a first-generation Chinese American played out in small ways that influenced my interactions with non-Chinese expatriates from the U.S. and U.K. and also native Chinese individuals. My aunt, who was concerned for my safety while I traveled around certain parts of Beijing alone, reassured me (and herself, too) that as long as I didn’t speak too much while in public, I could fly under the radar as a native Chinese person based on my looks and comportment. She suggested that because I am fully Chinese in ethnicity, as long as I didn’t speak long enough for my American accent to come through in my Mandarin, I would be seen as a native Chinese. While this has arguably always been true, it was even more valid during this visit than my last one in 2008; Western brands are

even more ubiquitous in Beijing than they were nine years ago. Boarding the subway every day in Beijing, the seats were filled by young people in North Face jackets and Doc Martens boots tapping away at their iPhones. I would fit right in. My dual identity as American and Chinese influenced my research and interactions, and afforded me a simultaneously emic (inside) and etic (outside) perspective on contemporary Beijing culture. Some of my native Chinese interlocutors would hesitate to speak Chinese to me before I assured them that I do. Overall, I found that people tended to engage with whichever aspect of my identity—Chinese, American, or Chinese American—suited their purposes. People saw and treated me as simultaneously American and therefore *waiguo* (foreign) but also Chinese and therefore very familiar.

Traveling alone to China for the first time also caused me to consider more broadly the multiple formations of Chineseness that come to light as a result of diasporic movement, fragmented communities, and imagined conceptions of race and ethnicity. It was only through spending time with Chinese people my age that I realized, in spite of what I thought I knew and remembered about trips to China, what I expected of Beijing this time around was largely informed by images, messages, and cues that I gleaned from the Internet and my own imagination. Indeed, how I conceptualized “Chineseness” is shifting as a result of newfound opportunities I have for real relationships and face-to-face contact with Chinese-born young people. In negotiating my own identity as an American-born Chinese woman doing ethnographic work in China, I draw from anthropologist Andrea Louie’s extensive writing and reflection on what it means to be Chinese in a transnational, multi-sited context:

“[Chinese American and Chinese] communities are linked not so much by contemporary social networks and shared cultural or political beliefs as by myths of common origins that define Chineseness as a mixture of racial, national, and territorial identities. Within these interactions exist possibilities not only for varied connections and relationships based on shared heritage but also new forms of difference.” (Louie 2004, 7)

These new forms of difference can be explicitly named, expounded upon, and bridged in part thanks to the advent of global communications technologies. Star and I are able to keep in contact

via WeChat, the popular messaging and social media application overwhelmingly popular among people of all ages in China. Once I returned to the United States, Star asked me questions about the presidential inauguration, and shared pictures of her new apartment in Beijing. I snapped a picture of the flagship Supreme store in Soho, to which she responded with lighthearted jealousy. The large rift that once existed between myself and my cousins in China now felt smaller thanks to the common ground we could establish with the aid of digital communication technologies.

WeChat, or *Weixin*, proved to be a significant player in the way I initiated, organized and archived my fieldwork. Developed by Tencent, a holding company based in China that develops a slew of gaming, messaging, and social media apps, WeChat has over 700 million active users. During the weeks leading up to my arrival in Beijing, I reached out to people primarily via email. Many of my interlocutors make use of virtual private networks (VPNs), which allow them to bypass the parts of the Internet—including Gmail—that remain blocked by the Chinese government.

Once I arrived in China, WeChat became my primary mode of communication. WeChat allows users to “introduce” contacts to one another, and I found that these small virtual greetings became the main means by which I found more people to interview. Over the course of two weeks in January, my WeChat contact list expanded as I met with producers, promoters, managers, journalists, music licensers, and designers involved in various corners of Beijing’s electronic and underground music scene. I conducted a total of ten formal ethnographic interviews and attended shows at one nightclub and one hybrid record shop and venue. I met with my interlocutors over light vegetarian fare, tea, bar snacks, and coffee; our encounters took place in home studios, offices, a product showroom, and in one instance, the standing room of a dimly lit nightclub.

Because I am interested in the everyday mechanisms by which the global form of electronic music is shaped into a local artifact in Beijing, I did not focus on one person, venue, or

dynamic in particular; rather, I followed the different individuals with whom I spoke and allowed them to show me, through our conversations, which areas to explore. Considering the “vast amount of information which is linked to membership of a field,” in other words the flows of objects, technologies, ideologies, and individuals that make up a dynamic creative community, it follows that my ethnography be multi-sited in the way that George Marcus describes. A multi-sited approach to ethnographic research is necessary and fruitful when “the object of study is ultimately mobile and multiply situated, so any ethnography of such an object will [feature] juxtapositions of phenomena that conventionally have appeared to be ‘worlds apart’” (Marcus 1995).

When an ethnographic object, in this case electronic music, is “multiply situated,” an ethnographer following the object, whatever it may be, will have to then contextualize and work within each environment in which the object exists. The following are the main contexts and frameworks within which electronic music in Beijing operates and thus where my ethnographic research took place: electronic music as a sonic art form born out of a confluence of digital technologies; as a medium through which individuals and groups in Beijing negotiate their individual and national imaginations and identities; as a site of performance and embodied aesthetics; and as a cultural meeting ground of Western musical stylings and a counterculture rooted in contemporary Chinese culture.

Since my ethnographic research registered on multiple levels and across different sites, I am careful to situate my research in the context of critical, self-reflective anthropology. Conscious of the fact that I am studying a culture that I feel close to but am ultimately not embedded within, I firmly root my anthropological thinking about contemporary Beijing culture in a critical anthropological paradigm. While increasingly self-conscious of its historical station of power and authority as a Western discipline, contemporary cultural anthropology is nevertheless tied to legacies of scientific racism and imbalances of power between ethnographers and those they

study. As critical anthropologist and professor of African American Studies Faye Harrison writes, “anthropology is still perceived [...] [as a] vehicle for legitimating current policies of global, neocolonial capitalism (Harrison 2008). My positionality as a Chinese American student doing ethnography in my family’s ancestral country of origin thus becomes a contested site of power, access, and identity, which can be further linked to broader theoretical problems within the discipline of anthropology.

While my ethnographic work exists in the realm of experimental and interpretive anthropology outlined by George Marcus and Michael Fischer, I also go beyond their proposed guidelines on what ethnography should aim to accomplish and represent. While Marcus and Fischer maintain in the conclusion to *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* that “empirical exploration of the historical and cultural conditions for the articulation and implementation of different values” remains the aim of ethnography, I also use my work to argue for the power of ethnography to effect social change, as well as anthropology’s more abstract powers to evoke emotional response and deeper connections between individuals through the experience of ethnographic encounters and reading anthropological texts.

For example, Karen Brodtkin’s work on the hospital industry’s nonprofessional support staff blurs the boundaries between competing theoretical camps in contemporary anthropology, while also demonstrating the social power of ethnography in our contemporary moment. Writing as an anthropologist and Marxist feminist in the postmodern/late-capitalist era, Brodtkin reimagines the concept and meaning of class along non-essentialist lines through her fieldwork studying African American women hospital staff at the Duke Medical Center in North Carolina. Via ethnographic analysis, Brodtkin de-centers masculine labor and illuminates the status of unwaged work, the work of women, and domestic work as legitimate forms of labor. Faye Harrison applauds Brodtkin’s work as “placing considerable emphasis on the multiple identities and experiences of working-class people and an intersecting axes of race, class, and

gender” (Harrison 2008). Because I engage with both Chinese citizens and Western expatriates involved in the electronic music scene, like Brodtkin I also apply a lens of intersectionality to how I think and write about my fieldwork in Beijing. Ever-conscious of Orientalist reifications of the so-called non-West, I am careful to ground my ethnographic explorations of globalization and Beijing underground culture in critical and reflexive theory.

chapter two:
creating space

“Ni chouyan ma?” *Do you smoke?* When I shook my head, Shao Yanpeng leaned over in his living room chair, tipping some more strong jasmine tea into a short Old Fashioned glass in front of me, while fishing a crumpled pack of cigarettes from the back pocket of his pale blue pants. He lit a slim cigarette and took a drag before slowly unfurling the narrative of his background in music. I pushed my phone, which lay on the tiny coffee stand between our two IKEA chairs, closer in Shao’s direction to better capture his soft and subdued speaking voice. After a few simple motions—swapping my Adidas sneakers for a pair of cloth house slippers upon entering, introducing myself, and saying *xie xie* (thank you) to every offer of tea and fruit—I found myself in the home of someone who, up until moments ago, I had only ever known virtually.

Because I had previously corresponded with Shao when I wrote about him for *The FADER* two years ago, I was especially surprised by how quickly our fleeting virtual connection became real, embodied, and quotidian. Indeed, while the following chain of events may seem mundane, it exhibits how the forces of globalization and increased connectivity facilitated by the Internet unfolds in our everyday lives. What happens after individuals with similar interests connect on the Internet? How do people negotiate cultural difference and shared interests through interactions, gestures, and exchanges, both on and offline? How do dynamic forces like globalism and modernity take on unique life in China, and how do these concepts become real on the dance floor of an electronic music club or in the bedroom studio of a Chinese music producer?



top: Shao Yanpeng's desktop equipment
bottom left: Shao's living room and workspace
bottom right: Shao's home studio

My experience meeting Shao on the Internet and then spending time with him in person just a couple of years later exists in the complex landscape of digitally-facilitated interpersonal connections, communication, transportation, and time-space compression. The purpose of this chapter is to situate these flows within a working theoretical framework that draws on existing literature while also tailoring theory to my specific field site of urban, underground Beijing. While I draw from heavily-theorized ideas such as globalism, locality, place, modernity, and the avant-garde, I rigorously contextualize each phenomenon within the specific situation of contemporary China. Recognizing that these ideas are the preserve of Western social theory, I emphasize the adaptability of these concepts to the so-called non-West, and in doing so imply the intellectual and semantic construction of each. The intersecting concepts of the global and local, the avant-garde, and postmodernity form a dynamic fabric in which the culture of electronic music in Beijing is interwoven. Before I can unravel the specific ways electronic music as a global form becomes localized in Beijing, I use this chapter to orient my work in a theoretical space.

In maintaining a critical ethnographic stance, I build on anthropologists and other academics who seek to problematize the seemingly distinct notions of “global” and “local” and “East” and “West.” By adopting a translocal approach as articulated by mass communications scholar Fabienne Darling-Wolf and applying it to anthropology, I demonstrate how ethnographic detail can illuminate the blending, rather than collision, of global and local flows. Thus, I begin with the understanding that the blending and re-contextualizing of culture exists within our contemporary global structures, and then I move beyond a mere acknowledgement of those phenomena towards constructing a working theoretical framework composed of them. I am primarily instead interested in unraveling the everyday mechanisms by which global flows mix with local meaning in the context of Beijing’s underground electronic music scene. In this case, ethnographic methods are necessary to understand how certain practices, global products, and

patterns of sociality get “lifted” from local contexts and transformed “across indefinite spans of time and space” (Giddens 1990: 21).

Anthropologists have long theorized how the global flow of culture, capital, and information affects the dynamics of ethnographic work and the discipline of anthropology more broadly (see Appadurai [1990, 1996], Tsing [2005]). The question is no longer whether globalization exists and if it affects fieldwork, but how it alters the anthropological pursuit of knowledge. In my project, I am especially interested in how generalized global flows intersect with the everyday, local, and embodied byproducts of modernity and culture. In order to problematize notions of how the global and interacts with the local in a contemporary Chinese context, I first need to articulate how the two are theorized and criticized in contemporary theory, and how both are ultimately created and reinforced through a collective imagination of modernity.

Invoking Benedict Anderson (1983), Arjun Appadurai (1996) writes that the globalization of culture results in a “plurality of imagined worlds.” In the introduction to *Electronic Elsewheres*, film scholar Chris Berry writes that “networks of electronic communication are transforming our senses of locality and community [such that] we need to develop a ‘politics of dislocation’ that is concerned with the new modalities of belonging that are emerging around us” (Berry 2010: 3). A “collective awareness of growing global interconnectedness” permeates discourse in contemporary anthropology (Pieterse 2009: 16). Harvey writes that “the urban and the city are not simply constituted by social processes, they are constitutive of them” (Harvey 1997: 23).

Theorists of globalization note that the proliferation of transnational connections creates a new role for the imagination in negotiating individual and collective identity in a global setting. At the same time, individuals negotiate their locality through the consumption of and engagement with culturally mixed products, images, and information “disconnected from their place of origin” (Darling-Wolf 2015: 2). For example, oftentimes when artists would speak about

electronic production, they would describe how a particular track sounded “like it could’ve come from anywhere,” but somehow also displayed characteristics of being authentically Chinese.

Appadurai argues that building on technological changes and rapid developments in electronic communications and media, “the imagination has become a collective, social fact” (Appadurai 1996: 5). Placing a trans-local lens over my ethnographic work moves beyond a traditional comparison between global and local, and instead emphasizes the multifaceted, relational dynamics between the two. One crucial benefit of moving my ethnographic work beyond “global” and “local” is that it unlinks my ethnographic analysis from the binary stronghold of “East” and “West” that permeates so much scholarship on non-Western societies. As Jan Nederveen Pieterse writes, the ideological division of global politics and culture along an East-West line is an “artificial and polemical division, a cultural posture” that “played a much larger role in rhetoric and representation than in reality” (Pieterse 2009: 126). Nevertheless, East-West binary tends to grant power, culture, and global authority to the West, with global-local interactions “predominantly studied in terms of how the Rest resists, imitates, or appropriates the West” (Iwabuchi 2002: 50). This problematic conception of global dynamics falls into a linear, evolutionary conception of cultural and societal development while at the same time obscuring the existence and legitimacy of “other modes of organization, knowledge production, and distribution as valid Western alternatives” (Darling-Wolf 2015: 7-8).

The increasing commercial interdependence between the United States and China adds an interesting wrinkle to how I theorize the East-West relationship in my ethnography. According to economist Paul Krugman, “we have become a nation in which people make a living by selling one another houses, and the pay for the houses with money borrowed from China” (Krugman 2006). The American-Asian relationship is deeply complex, but influences my ethnographic framework; this fraught yet symbiotic relationship between nations directly illustrates Appadurai’s point that the increasing flow of capital, culture, and information across the globe “proves that the

United States is no longer the puppeteer of a world system of images, but is only one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes” (Appadurai 1990: 583).

For my purposes, I argue that it is not enough to critique this historically rooted, academically perpetuated binary of an East-West division. Indeed, “the critique of East-West divides reproduces and privileges them in the process” (Pieterse 2009: 140). While I acknowledge that much of the literature upon which I build my own theoretical framework accepts or at least exists within this East-West division, I am careful in my critical anthropological stance to avoid naming or giving further credence to the idea. Instead, I adopt the viewpoint that “globalization is braided and influence is interlaced,” and that it is an unproductive task to conceptualize of global flows in such a binary.

Where does this problematization of global-local and East-West binaries leave my theoretical framework? In order to root my ethnographic work in a more tangible zone of theory, I also fold in a discussion of postmodernity and place—tailored, of course, to the Chinese context. Just as the East-West binary is a product of Western thought, so too are the concepts of modernity and postmodernity. While writers and scholars recognize the existence of postmodern thought, art, and aesthetics in China, it is important to note that postmodernity is a *borrowed* frame of reference that takes on new life in Chinese context.

While postmodernity is not a concept indigenous to Chinese intellectual thought, with time it has rooted itself into the unique soil of Chinese society. Just as I am careful to frame my discussion of global-local flows in a way that is sensitive to the historic distribution of power across nations, I am careful to contextualize the relevance of terms like modernity and place within the Chinese context. Without such rigorous contextualization, “using the term postmodern may seem at best to evade fundamental economic, social, political, and cultural problems, at worst as a Eurocentric recolonization of a Third World terrain marked by uneven development” (Dirlik & Zhang 2000: 3).

Postmodernism first came onto the Chinese intellectual scene, particularly literary circles, in the mid-eighties via the work of Frederic Jameson. Yet the life it took on in China is a result of China's simultaneous cultural distance and socioeconomic proximity to the places where postmodernism as a movement and lens took form. A term like postmodernism might conjure specific temporal and cultural signals that orient the ideas of postmodernism to a specific time, place, and group of individuals, however it permeated Chinese society during a time of transitional economic and social change (Dirlik & Zhang 2000: 33). Though postmodernity is a borrowed phrase and concept in China, it is also to some extent an indigenous product, because of its relevance to the development of Chinese politics, economy, and culture on the global stage. It is this unique Chinese postmodernity—in part borrowed and reconfigured as something Chinese—that frames, along with blended notions of globalization and locality, that create the space in which my ethnographic work takes place. “Whether ‘postmodernism’ signals a new recognition of cultural differences or is simply ‘the proper last name of the west’ remains to be debated” (Huot 2000: 153).

Bruno Latour's theorizing of the modern, indeed his statement that “we have never been modern,” is useful in summarizing why it is so crucial to contextualize the modern and postmodern in an anthropological discussion of China. Latour argues that, through the analogy of the various newspaper headlines one could read on any given day, academic disciplinary boundaries are not well suited to examine the complexity of lived experience: “all of culture and all of nature get churned up again every day” (Latour 2). Global actors are scattered globally, well apart geographically from one another, and yet they are mutually implicated in world events.

Thumbing through a paper, one might find that “on page twelve, the Pope, French bishops, Monsanto, the Fallopian tubes, and Texas fundamentalists gather in a strange cohort around a single contraceptive” (Latour 2). By this imagery Latour means that various global actors—from the Pope to reproductive body parts—are together implicated in one moment. Part of Latour's

criticism is that academic disciplines are too keen on parsing up events in to different disciplines, and that anthropologists in particular resist applying their own gaze onto modern societies. Latour pushes for an investigation of what it truly means to be modern, and in doing so he arrives at the conclusion that modernity as a concept does not completely hold, and that perhaps we were never modern. I take Latour's framework one step further to suggest that we have never been *postmodern*.

Going forward, I establish that although postmodernity is a slippery, malleable, and evidently constructed conceptual tool, it works in the context of China if its simultaneously borrowed and constructed nature is properly acknowledged and contextualized. Similarly to how Latour explodes our notion of modernity in his writing by revealing how constructed it is, Marc Augé's writing on place and non-place also disrupts conventionally held beliefs about time, space, and modernity. The final piece of my theoretical framework is situating my ethnographic exploration of Chinese electronic music in a non-place.

Augé poses "non-places" as the location of "supermodernity," and a movement beyond traditionally held senses of anthropological place. Lacking a kind of concrete distinctiveness that traditional anthropological places possess, non-places are the product of globalization and supermodernity. Supermodernity, according to Augé, is marked above all by excess. Global flows of culture and information have fueled, according to Augé, an "explicit and intense" desire to give meaning to the present (Augé 1995: 29). Modern communication, which has only developed more since the time Augé's writing, has made it difficult to categorize time and space neatly, giving way to this concept of non-place.

Whereas "anthropological place," is "formed by individual identities, through complicities of language, local references, [and] the unformulated rules of living," non-place is characterized by "the fleeting, the temporary, and ephemeral (Augé 1995: 78, 101). Non-places are thus new anthropological spaces for ethnographers to explore: "the world of supermodernity does not

exactly match the one in which we believe we live,” Augé writes, “for we live in a world that we have not yet learned to look at. We have to relearn to think about space” (Augé 1995: 36). This concept of non-place as a theoretical space in which history, class, and time appear to defer to the individual’s power to self-fashion meaning through the consumption and internalization of information is extremely useful to my consideration of electronic music in Beijing’s underground scene.

When I entered Shao Yanpeng’s walk-up loft for our first in-person meeting that afternoon, we both became implicated in a complex network of globally-facilitated communication and local encounter; I would argue that the temporary space that our two identities formed created a non-place of sorts. Now that I have elaborated on questions of globalization, locality, modernity, non-place, and have assembled a constructed and adapted theoretical framework, I can further explore how the individuals I met in Beijing crafted their identities and re-fashioned a global art form into a local cultural symbol. Throughout the following discussion of everyday life among Beijing’s electronic artists and their colleagues, discussions of global flows of information, self-fashioned modernities, and *bolai pin* (borrowed things) taking on new life in local contexts will continue to frame my analysis of electronic music in Beijing.

chapter three:
producing artistic identity

In 2013, the producer and DJ Howie Lee received a master's degree in Sound Art from the University of the Arts in London. While away from his native China, Howie lived with his friend and fellow electronic artist Harikiri (born André Alexander), who describes himself as “that Jamaican-Japanese dude from Britain but living in China.” Before they both temporarily relocated to London, André began hosting informal gatherings called Beatmakers Nights at local venues in Beijing, mostly School Bar in the Andingmen District. These nights were opportunities for local young people to meet each other in person and share ideas about electronic production, underground music, and youth culture over drinks and music.

I learned about Howie and André's mutual influence in bringing “Beijing kids out of their bedrooms and into clubs” by speaking with their mutual friend Alex Taggart, who is a DJ, journalist, and music licensing and promotions consultant. Over salad bowls and green juice at a health-conscious American-style chain restaurant called Wagas, the Isle of Man native explained his thoughts on how the global form of electronic music became local in Beijing. Even though Howie spent time embedded in London's busy electronic scene, Alex noted that Howie came back from London with a heightened awareness of what it meant to be a Chinese artist: “turns out it's more than throwing an *erhu* over a techno track,” Alex said with a sardonic smile.

Three years ago, Howie returned to his alma mater, the Communication University of China, to give a lecture on electronic music and underground culture to students in the major he studied. Alex, who accompanied Howie to the event, noticed that most of the audience members seemed to only be there to receive participation credit for a class. “But there was this one kid who kept asking these really technical questions,” Alex continued. That person was Jason Hou, who is now a member of Howie's collective and electronic label Do Hits. Jason, who had just returned from studying in Canada, wasn't affiliated with the university; he'd found out about the talk through the Beijing Pulse, a YouTube channel that Alex started to document the nascent

electronic scene in Beijing. The two got to talking after Howie's lecture and have been friends and collaborators since.

The circumstances that brought Howie, Jason, and Alex to the same university lecture hall illustrate how multiple paths of globalization play out on an individual scale. Howie, a Beijing native, returned to his alma mater; Alex moved to Beijing after a year of studying abroad at Dalian University and befriended Howie by attending shows and events; Jason, also from Beijing, came home after studying in Canada and found out about Howie's work through Alex's blog. This single encounter between the three individuals speaks to a larger trend of how time and space collapse in the process of connecting individuals around the globe who have shared interests or cultural aspirations.

As Arjun Appadurai notes, "with the advent of [...] the automobile, the airplane, the computer, and the telephone, we have entered into into an altogether new condition of neighborliness, even with those most distant from ourselves" (Appadurai 1996: 29). To avoid overstating the communitarian capabilities of global media and flows of culture, I emphasize Deleuze and Guattari here: while the global cultural realm might be more interconnected between groups, it is also increasingly multiple and rhizomatic, in a way that necessitates theorizing the sense of rootlessness and lack of place that global cultural flows create (Deleuze & Guattari 1980). Most useful to this chapter, which is devoted to understanding how everyday meaning is created among members of the electronic scene, is "the new role for the imagination in social life and as social practice" amidst the simultaneous disjuncture and connection of our global moment (Appadurai 1996: 31).

In Chapter 2, I assembled a theoretical framework that tailors theories of globalization, modernity, and non-place to my critical anthropological discussion of urban China. With that culturally specific foundation in place, this chapter and the next both explore the minutiae of life—the narratives, customs, and attitudes—that exist within and actively constitute Beijing's

electronic music scene. Carefully unpacking what Malinowski calls the “imponderabilia of daily life”—those small acts and attentions with embedded and embodied meaning—within the community paves the way for an anthropologically nuanced understanding of how the global and local are mutually entwined in the construction of meaning in Beijing’s electronic scene. This chapter explores the constructions of artistic identity through work, consumption, and the accumulation of cultural knowledge and capital, while the following chapter meditates on patterns of socializing and constructions of imagined community and collective history.

In order to illuminate how electronic music, a *bolaipin* (borrowed thing) much like postmodernity, is re-made in its local Chinese context through everyday practices and interpersonal exchanges, I employ an organizing metaphor of a daily routine to structure this chapter. This is not to say that every person I met in Beijing has the same routine; the categories are purposefully broad to honor the diversity of experiences I encountered in the field. I employ this metaphor to draw attention to the fact that my anthropological inquiry exists in the realm of the quotidian, the embodied, and the everyday. Through my anthropological exploration of electronic music in Beijing, I demonstrate highlight the intersections between daily life and global forces within the context of electronic music in Beijing, and how those blends turn electronic music from a global form to a local culture.

First, by discussing the daily occupations of various people in the scene, I reveal how individuals construct artistic identities and global aspirations within their local economy. Then, I move to the level of their creative working time: at this level, I discuss how objects and material culture figure into the re-fashioning of electronic music into an authentic Chinese artifact, as well as how the accumulation of cultural capital through knowledge of global and local music history makes electronic music a more localized cultural artifact.

Before tracing the meaning of everyday practices and attitudes in order to understand the embodied mechanisms by which electronic music is re-made in Beijing, I expound on the value

of the “everyday” as an analytical and philosophical orientation. Dealing in the realm of the minutiae of daily life is the domain of the ethnographer; understanding the meaning behind the everyday is the project of anthropology. To form an analytical framework of the everyday, which will guide the rest of this chapter, I draw from Clifford Geertz, Bronislaw Malinowski, Ben Highmore, and Harry Harootunian. In his essay “Thick Description,” Clifford Geertz outlines a definition of culture that I work with in forming an analytic frame of the everyday:

“The concept of culture I espouse [...] is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (1973:5).

In Geertz’s model, culture is an amorphous web of meaning contained within “specks of behaviors,” and “small matters”; therefore, the role of the anthropologist is not to analyze the entire culture, but to extrapolate meaning through a careful consideration of small symbols and daily behaviors that constitute a web of significance.

To continue theorizing the everyday, I follow Ben Highmore’s consideration of the everyday as a useful counterpoint to homogenizing forces of modernity and globalization. “Everyday life becomes the cultural experience of modernity that is never simply equivalent to what might seem to be the homogenizing ambitions of capitalism,” Highmore argues. (176). Considering the everyday allows for a more nuanced picture of how modernity plays out in daily life, which is an invaluable perspective for an anthropologist working in a realm as mediated, digitized, and seemingly global as the electronic music scene in a rapidly-developing Beijing. As Harootunian writes on the value of cross-cultural figuring of everydayness:

If modernity was driven by the desiring machine of capitalism, promising to install its regime of production and consumption everywhere, the everyday, service as a minimal unification of the present and signal the level of lived experience and reproduction would, in fact, negotiate the compelling demands of homogeneity through the mediation of a past that constantly stood in a tense, often antagonistic relationship to the present of the new (2000: 63).

Joining the general flows of global modernity with the specific realities of regional existence illustrates the usefulness of the everyday as a perspective for cross-cultural studies within the context of modernity and globalization. With this orientation of the everyday in place, I can begin my analysis of several touchstones of daily life within the context of electronic music in Beijing.

“This kind of music doesn’t feed me,” Liu Xiaoyuan said dryly, shaking his head and chuckling. To my left, Xiaoyuan’s colleague, a fellow producer named Liu Yiwei (no relation), nodded between bites of his burger. When I met Liu Xiaoyuan and Liu Yiwei, the two producers had just finished a photoshoot for a local magazine. We were eating lunch in the central corridor of Beijing’s 798 arts district, at a café called Flat White. Built in Bauhaus style from an abandoned military factory area during the 1950s, 798 is a creative, architectural and entrepreneurial collaboration between East Germany and China. While walking around 798, I could feel a spatial separation, signaled by large art installations and brightly painted buildings, between the streets of 798 and the high-rise residential areas just outside the district.

Sipping from a small latte inside of the crowded, sun-drenched café on a peculiarly warm afternoon, Xiaoyuan continued in Chinese, “So I have to find another job, you know? I have to do something else.” Yiwei, who produces and performs with the name FAR/∞ (pronounced Far Infinity) murmured in agreement again. When he is not producing, performing, or managing Prajnasonic, the electronic label he co-founded with Yiwei early last year, Xiaoyuan engineers car body structures for BMW. Xiaoyuan tells me that designing the outsides of cars somehow helps him understand his approach to engineering techno. Xiaoyuan also often gets to travel for work. Recently, he went on a short business trip to Chicago and came back with new equipment purchased from the States. Yiwei, who received a fellowship to write and create in Berlin for a year, continues to do freelance journalism in Beijing to support himself and his art. Since Prajnasonic is a completely independent project, Yiwei spends time overseeing everything from

promotions to the label's website design as the team establishes Prajnasonic within the electronic scene.

One reality of producing underground electronic music in Beijing is that artists must locate opportunities beyond their music to support themselves financially. Expatriates living in China must also ensure that they can maintain their work visas for stay in the country. Brad Seippel is one of these expatriates negotiating his artistic identity alongside the financial and logistical realities of the global economy. A freelance writer, producer by the name of thruoutin, and U.S.-China record label (Seippelabel) founder with his Santa Clara-based sister, Brad told me the story of how he arrived in Beijing while we sat in his apartment studio. He was sitting at his long black work desk, dragging virtual piles of electronic and experimental records onto a thumb drive for me to keep.

Originally from outside New Orleans, Brad studied Mandarin in college and moved to Beijing after graduating. Though his official business in Beijing was an English teaching position, Brad was also drawn to China because of the burgeoning experimental music scene he caught wind of from the States: "the natural thing was to just go to where the music was being made," he told me. After two years, Brad left his teaching position—"I was pretty much done being someone else's worker," he explained. Brad and his friend started their own culture and education exchange center shortly after that. Framed as a community learning space, the school has regular students between 6 and 40 years old. "Most of the kids are from middle class families, and what they lack is exposure to different environments to learn in besides a very specific model of classroom," Brad told me. People who go to Brad's experimental learning space can learn anything from Spanish to guitar to multimedia art; the curriculum is only limited by the skill sets of the teachers in the space.

Brad's center is, I argue, a kind of Augé would describe as a non-place: it is a crossroads that bears the potentials of human interaction and flows of information. Even though I

characterize the center as a non-place, and thus imply that it exists within a cultural milieu of supermodernity, it is also an extremely localized cultural hub. Teachers are both Chinese and expatriate, and the course offerings of the community learning space vary day-to-day, even hour-to-hour depending on the schedules of the teachers. While they have over 100 enrolled students, they barely do any sort of major advertising. The culture of this learning space is very much engrained in the subtleties of everyday community as opposed to global aspirations: “it’s really just a place to come in, and hang out,” Brad told me.

Electronic producers in Beijing crafting their identities as artists with independent projects—Xiaoyuan and Yiwei’s Prajnasonics label; Brad’s Seippelabel and zine *Jingweir*—while also maintaining their financial livelihood is an example of the everyday effects of the globalizing forces that academics often theorize in broad strokes. Ethnographic methods, specifically an attention to the minutiae of daily routines, reveal how seeking out financial opportunities becomes part of forming a larger creative identity within Beijing’s nascent electronic enclave.

Moreover, Brad and Xiaoyuan’s experiences point to the individual effects of globalization. Their situations illustrate what Appadurai means by the “cultural flux” and breaches in normal standards of existence caused by globalized economies:

The search for steady points of reference, as critical life choices are made, can be very difficult. It is in this atmosphere that the invention of tradition (and of ethnicity, kinship, and other identity markers) can become slippery, as the search for certainties is regularly frustrated by the fluidities of transnational communication. As group pasts become increasingly parts of museums, exhibits, and collections, both in national and transnational spectacles, culture becomes less what Pierre Bourdieu would have called a habitus (a tacit realm of reproducible practices and dispositions) and more an arena for conscious choice, justification, and representation, the latter often to multiple and spatially dislocated audiences. (Appadurai 1990: 44).

While I will discuss the active construction of the scene’s history by its participants in the next chapter, the power Brad and Xiaoyuan have in defining their multifaceted artistic identities amidst a shifting global economy is sourced directly from the data of the everyday—indeed, from the webs of significance that they themselves create through their choices. To members of the

Beijing electronic scene, globalization is more than just being able to download the new Kanye West release from an apartment in Beijing, or the punctuation of Chinese skylines by McDonalds' golden arches; it is at once a far more mundane and consequential experience with real implications on their livelihoods and artistic aspirations. Although electronic music is often framed as a greatly democratized art form due to its highly digitized nature, my ethnographic work in the everyday lives of artists in Beijing reveals real barriers to committing oneself to electronic music completely. Thus, electronic music occupies a different register of everyday significance in the local context than it would appear within the global sphere.

My interactions with various members of the electronic community revealed that knowledge of musical and cultural reference points within the local scene were important contributors to one's cultural capital and, as Helen Feng called it, "clout." Moving beyond the occupational realm, I now move towards the ways individuals, both artists and listeners, spend their free time accumulating cultural knowledge for themselves. I argue that these personal efforts undertaken by various individuals is an experiment in turning an imagined community of electronic fans into a lived and intimate knowledge base for the individual—thus, electronic as an art form is again localized in the imaginations of individual members of the scene as they imagine themselves within it. This discussion will also unravel the interactions between virtual and real world, and in doing so deepen my current discussion of how electronic music and other global flows take on local significance in Beijing, through the perspective of the everyday.

"The way young people reacted to music in China was very different from how it is back home, and that made me wanna come back here and finish my degree," Alex Taggart told me during our lunch at the mall. He explained how, growing up in the U.K., he felt that at some point in his early adolescent life, the confluence of the media he consumed and the people he hung out with eventually presented him with a simple question: "Do you want to like mainstream stuff or do you want to like alternative stuff?" Magazines, other forms of media, and older friends helped

guide this decision for Alex. As someone who grew up reading Pitchfork after school to find new music, I related to Alex's recalling of how he assembled his individualized musical and cultural enclave.

"[The music you listened to] kinda guided your identity growing up," Alex told me. For Alex, the combination of the music he listened to, the clothes he wore, and the way eh acted—indeed, the very aspects of "imponderabilia" that Malinowski describes—created for Alex and others like him an aesthetic identity. In Dalian, the university in China where Alex studied, young people were not confronted with this choice as explicitly, if at all. Instead, they had to actively seek out forms of alternative and underground culture, often in the form of *dakou* CDs or actually going to clubs and venues for shows. "So when you found someone who was really into alternative culture, they were super interesting, because it's like, 'How did you find this stuff?'" Alex explained. This kind of independent ethos of searching and defining one's musical taste, which he says has long been taken out of the equation for young people in the United States, Canada, and Europe, is part of what drew him to Beijing.

Helen Feng had the following to say about the specific challenge of acquiring cultural knowledge as a young person in Beijing versus elsewhere:

All [American kids] had to do was go down the street and go to the record store and talk to the old guy there and listen to whatever you wanted to, and go online and surf your favorite blogs and get whatever information you want—the amount of energy that you had to put in to get the culture, to acquire the culture—is so much less than these kids. Your surroundings are so much more supportive than the surroundings of these people.

Specifically referencing the issue of access and censorship of the Chinese web, Helen—like Alex—places cultural value and significance on the everyday act of combing through the Internet and actively constructing one's musical palette instead of being spoon-fed by media structures.

The night before I left Beijing, I spoke to Josh Feola in the small office and showroom of The Product Republic, an apparel and lifestyle brand run by Markus M. Schneider, a DJ, curator, and creative consultant. Josh is an expatriate from the United States who produces experimental

music, plays in a few rock bands, and helps promote events for various groups. He has also written extensively on the scene for Chinese and English publications. Josh was stirring in the packet of Starbucks instant coffee I retrieved in my bag for him while we spoke; he had just returned from visiting family in the United States and was combatting jet lag. “I’m inspired by the way electronic producers make music here,” Josh told me between handfuls of salted peanuts, a ubiquitous snack food put out by hosts of informal gatherings in China. Speaking more on the unique relationship Chinese artists have to alternative music history, Josh illustrated a key way that global art forms are re-made in the Chinese context:

There was that sudden influx of international music that became available quite suddenly with the opening of the Internet and economy. In the late 90s early 2000s, an entire century of underground history became available. First through *dakou*, but then even more importantly with the Internet and BBS (bulletin board systems). The result is a weird hybrid: people who can mix Steve Reich or Philip Glass with Hawkwind or Tangerine Dream. And also be into Detroit techno or Atlanta trap. All in a way that's very un-self-conscious. As opposed to if I were to do that, I'm kind of more conditioned in a way to not.

Here, Josh points to the fact that none of the musical stylings that electronic musicians tend to deal in—minimalism of Philip Glass or the simultaneously regional and reproducible sounds of trap—have roots in China. Despite and also because of this, Josh implies that Chinese electronic artists have more freedom to freely mix genres and stylings than do their American or European peers. A number of Do Hits Collective tracks exhibit this freedom, with the sound of distorted traditional Chinese instruments laced over hip hop beats.

Lévi-Strauss’s concept of bricolage is useful for understanding the process of not only building one’s musical taste, but also crafting a contemporary Chinese electronic sound. In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige explains that “bricolage refers to the means by which the so-called ‘primitive’ man responds to the world around him via ad hoc, or improvised, methods” (Hebdige 1979:103). In the context of my ethnographic work, bricolage can be understood as the process by which Chinese producers acquire various sonic reference points and

techniques to produce music that draws on a variety of elements; this concept is especially useful in conjunction with Adorno's theories of popular music. For Adorno, the fundamental characteristic of popular music that differentiates it from serious music is standardization—that is, common sonic traits among all forms of popular music, predictability, and tropes are what make popular music popular. According to Adorno's theory as it pairs with Lévi-Strauss's concept of bricolage, then, Chinese artists are able to take a global standardized form (Western popular music) and localize it to suit their everyday aesthetic tastes, which are inherently local to their context.

In tracing how artists negotiate their aspirations with their financial needs, and then understanding how the specific context of China influences the accumulation of individual cultural knowledge, I demonstrated how the global form of electronic music, and underground music more broadly, takes on new, localized meaning in Beijing. The next chapter continues this metaphor of a daily routine; I move beyond the individual artist and into the realm of the social scene to shed light on how the electronic music scene in Beijing maintains connections to an analog past, while then turning my attention to how electronic music becomes everyday and authentically Chinese through the active construction of its history by participants.

chapter four:
making a scene

The pace of my last night in Beijing was not unlike a typical night I'd have in New York City. After finishing a final group ethnographic interview with Markus M. Schneider, Josh Feola, and Wang Menghan, a young producer and DJ, I walked from The Product Republic's showroom to the Peking International Youth Hostel, where I was meeting Star and her friend Candace. We booked beds there for the night since Wuzi University dorms closed at 11 PM, and we were going to a late show at DADA, the electronic club just steps away from our hostel. After a quick bite, we headed over. That night was *Shengrou* (fresh meat) night; on Fresh Meat nights, DADA would feature two or three new DJs at the tables. Since music started at 11 PM, Star, Candace, and I arrived at DADA around 11:30. We rented small lockers for our belongings and ordered drinks. Nursing my small drink, I saw people filter in: they were mostly young Chinese men dressed in styles you would see in New York electronic clubs: Virgil Abloh streetwear, Supreme, and all manner of Adidas and Nike apparel.

The floor was not crowded that night, and I later learned that the thin audience was probably due to the show being so close to Lunar New Year. "So many people flock to Beijing from elsewhere to make music," Josh explained to me, "but that means around this time it becomes a ghost town." In traversing the various levels at which electronic music is lifted from its global context and turned into a local Chinese cultural phenomenon, I have moved my focus to the level of the nightclub and the shared social scene. In this chapter, I continue my metaphor from Chapter 3 of the daily routine as a vehicle for exploring everydayness and local meaning in the electronic underground. By looking at the club scene and the construction of collective memories and imagined communities within the electronic enclave, I argue that additional ways electronic music is turned into a Chinese object that resists simplistic global-local definitions are articulations of a desire to return to analog/non-electronic traditions; the melding of traditional Chinese instruments with electronic technologies; and a collective investment of telling narratives about electronic music in Beijing.

In October 2016, Prajnasonic, led by Liu Yiwei and Liu Xiaoyuan, began a three-day series of shows called The Dark Room Tour. To the Prajnasonic guys, the premise was simple: three days of techno and other electronic music, where the only request was that audience members keep their phones off and away—hence the dark room. Yiwei explained in English, “In China it’s a lot of people who just focus on their phone. Every day i wake up and it starts with WeChat, maybe Taobao. The idea is to gather people and make them put their phones down. We can share a moment not online, but offline.” When I asked if the idea worked, Yiwei said it didn’t. “More and more people come to the club for parties, not all of them actually, but most of them are not focused on the music anymore,” he continued. When I spoke to Wang Menghan, who DJs and produces using her first name Menghan, she recalled a similar past and present with regards to the types of people electronic shows were drawing in Beijing. She mentioned that though it’s fine that people use electronic shows to get drunk or hook up, she wants people to feel “emotionally attached or in the rhythm, like they can connect together, not just for dance but more like for true connection with the music and each other.”

Arjun Appadurai asserts that “electronic media provide resources for self-imagining as an everyday social project” (1996: 4). The way artists like Yiwei and Menghan described how audiences are evolving in the electronic scene expresses a kind of yearning for a return to deep, embodied engagement and connection with music in real time, within the geographical borders of a specific dance floor. Yiwei tells me that that was the ethos behind the Dark Room Tour—he senses, that with more young people attending shows at places like DADA, a certain authenticity of reaction is lost. Benjamin’s idea of the aura is useful here: Walter Benjamin argues that, through the mechanical reproduction (and most likely the digital distribution) of art, works of art lose their aura—the aura representing an original work’s ineffable and irreproducible authenticity (Benjamin 1935: 4). I argue that this desire to return to a more authentic, emotionally-driven club experience means that individuals within Beijing have understood conceptions of what



top: Dark Room Tour flyer (Liu 2016)
bottom left and right: Fresh Meat Night,
January 2017 at DADA

constitutes authentic electronic music listening within their local scene, and are now expressing a desire to return to that. Their art is authentic, no longer considered just a borrowed thing from the West, and there is a desire to maintain the original aura of live performances at underground electronic shows.

Brad Seippel plays and customizes his own *pipa*, a four-string traditional Chinese plucked instrument, that have mini-MPCs attached near their bridges. This melding of traditional folk instrument with digital instrumentation is, from an anthropological perspective, evidence of a simultaneous localization and globalization of an everyday object. In the Chinese context, artists are taking traditional sounds and re-fashioning them to take on new life in the local Beijing context. “You’re not gonna hear *erhu* on a Diplo track,” Alex joked over our lunch, “that’s what makes it Chinese, what makes it special.” The aura is again useful here: digital manipulation of traditional Chinese folk sounds, for example the *erhu* and *pipa*, augment the essence of each traditional form and re-introduce these collectively held sounds—the traditional sonic elements of an imagined Chinese music community—into the electronic scene in a way that nods to the melding of global technologies with local instrumentation while also emphasizing the authentically Chinese aspect of this new hybrid.

Curious about the intersections, similarities, and disjunctures within the narration of a scene’s history, I opened most of my ethnographic interviews by asking my interlocutor to describe their involvement with the music scene in Beijing and how they became involved in it. By the time I met with Markus, Josh, and Menghan the night before my flight back to New York, I noticed that there were similar milestones that expatriates, Chinese natives, promoters, journalists, and DJs alike emphasized. Almost everyone I spoke to traced electronic music’s roots to the punk rock scenes of the 1990s. They also explained the pivotal role defunct clubs like White Rabbit, Shelter, and D22 had in fostering community and a sense of place within the scenes that precipitated electronic music in Beijing. Shao Yanpeng, formerly known as Dead J, as well as

Howie Lee and the Do Hits collective stuck out in people's minds as key figures to understand. Some people I spoke with even provided a meta-analysis of their narratives, recognizing that the "newness" of the scene was what drew them to it, and that their ability to have a stake in how the history of the scene carried forth in narratives was a major draw for many expatriates especially. Again, here Anderson's notion of imagined community is useful in understanding the value of reproducing, through histories and narratives, the development of the electronic underground in Beijing. By telling the story and constructing a collective history amenable to various viewpoints and perspectives, the authenticity and locality of the scene is explicated.

Maintaining an analytical framework of everydayness and the webs of significance contained within individuals' daily lives, I have analyzed how the desire for authentic reactions to music, an impulse to fuse traditional and digital technology, and the appearance of a shared history of the electronic music scene indicate the various everyday mechanisms by which meaning is produced on a local scale in the electronic scene, specifically at the level of gatherings and sociality. By examining these anthropologically, I emphasize the specific mechanisms by which electronic music is shaped into a local artifact and symbol in China.

conclusion

Towards the end of our conversation in which we had been discussing what it meant for electronic music to be “Chinese,” I asked Alex to recall moments where the music he witnessed felt authentically Chinese and local. He instantly had an answer:

It was the Do Hits Halloween party at DADA. At one point I was literally the only white person there. I was standing by the DJ booth. This guy Lofimaker, who also releases on Do Hits, this guy from Tianjin. He was playing original stuff, but it didn't sound particularly Chinese. He just made a really great trap beat, kind of an arty trap tune. The crowd was going with it, like "Yeah, it's gonna be good." And then suddenly, he cuts it and plays some old Chinese pop song from the 80s. I work in Chinese pop, that's stuff that I know about. But I'd never heard this one. The whole crowd starts singing. These are like, cool as fuck Chinese kids. All of them start singing along with it. That's when I lose it. I'm like, "This is it, this is it." I was almost in tears. This is a movement, this is culture that's happening right here. I turned to Michael [the owner of DADA] and was like "Congratulations man, you're playing host to a real important cultural movement here."

While Chinese kids in the crowd had been enjoying trap, a sound that people tell me is gradually taking on Chinese sonic traits within the scene, Lofimaker used his curatorial power as a DJ to conjure in his audience's mind a different aspect of Chinese music culture. This small moment, contained within the temporal and spatial borders of a Halloween party at a nightclub, nevertheless sticks out in Alex's and my memory.

This moment speaks to the multiplicities contained within the young electronic scene in Beijing; that trap and traditional 80s pop would both find warm reception in a crowd of young Chinese people suggests that both are rooted in the everyday consciousnesses of listeners and audiences alike, and thus have an authentic life as cultural objects in people's imaginations. While conducting my fieldwork, I encountered several questions related to authenticity and naming Chinese music: What is Chineseness in electronic music? What makes something Chinese? Is Chinese electronic music any track made by a Chinese person? Or is it when electronic tracks, regardless who produces them, include traditional Chinese sounds imagined and re-fashioned in novel ways that indicate the global flows of sonic fragments, the auras of objects, and the whisperings of an imagined community? Must we call all electronic music by Chinese individuals “Chinese electronic”? My fieldwork did not provide a clear answer to these questions, nor did I

expect it to. By talking to people enmeshed in the electronic scene, befriending young college students whose social lives sometimes brought them to nightclubs, and by spending hours on the subway listening to electronic music by Chinese artists, I instead arrived at the conclusion that the multiplicity of Beijing's electronic scene is what makes it authentic. The variety of identities, sounds, and philosophies that exist in the electronic enclave of Beijing point to a rich diversity of experiences and sounds that indicate how a global form like electronic music becomes made and re-made in a local setting.

While electronic music does not have its historical roots in Beijing, it has found new fertile ground in the underground enclaves of China's music scene. By tracing the local flows of culture and sound within this scene, I argue that we can understand how this global form takes on local, authentic meaning among the people who make and listen to the music. While electronic music is a heavily digital form, I also argue for the continued relevance of anthropological methods in a field mediated by and reliant on several intersecting forms of digital technology. Ethnography has a very important role in unpacking the ways by which global cultural flows become local. Special attention to the magic of everyday existence—the “imponderabilia” of daily life, the webs of significance spun by people and their communities—shows that the domain of music in this context, and I would argue in many the world over, is to elicit within listeners and producers feelings of meaningful, everyday connection to people, places, and sounds in an increasingly global yet fragmented and rhizomatic world. So although the form of electronic music is technically a borrowed one, the meaning it produces in everyday life is authentically Chinese.

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