Article

new media & society
1–20

DOI: 10.1177/14614448241232086
journals.sagepub.com/home/nms


From cultural intermediaries to platform adaptors: The transformation of music planning and artist acquisition in the Chinese music industry

Qian Zhang
Communication University of China, PR China

Keith Negus
Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

Abstract

Drawing from interviews with staff who sign and work with musicians and songwriters in the Chinese music industry, this article adopts the concepts of 'cultural intermediary' and 'platform adaptor' to trace a series of transformations since the post-1978 market reforms up to the present day. We argue that significant artistic and cultural shifts have occurred as the creative practices of music planners at record companies are superseded by content operators more narrowly focused on constructing content at digital platforms and adapting songs to short video platforms. The article locates the affordances of new media within a broader context of change and continuity in the Sinophone popular music world, contributing new knowledge about the work of music industry personnel involved in artist acquisition and repertoire development, adding to scholarship on an important yet under researched period in the history of the Chinese music industries.

Keywords

A&R, adaptation, China, cultural intermediaries, media ecology, music industry, music planning, platforms, short videos

Corresponding author:
Keith Negus, Department of Music, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW, UK.
Email: K.Negus@gold.ac.uk

This article focuses on staff responsible for signing and working with musicians and songwriters in the Chinese recording industry, tracing changes and continuities from the post-1978 market reforms up to the present day. During a period of social and economic transformations, we argue that significant artistic and cultural changes within the music industries, afforded by digital platforms, new media, and short video apps, have transformed the work of staff and the way artists and repertoire are produced and presented.

We draw critically from writings on 'cultural intermediaries' as a theoretical device to understand the practices of a new constituency of recording industry staff that emerged during the 1980s and 1990s as the modern Chinese recording industry became part of a socialist market economy. We then introduce the narrower conceptual metaphor of 'platform adaptors' to analyse how content operatives have responded to changes introduced by digital services, social media and short video apps. The term adaptor allows us to emphasise interdependencies and determinations within an 'ecology' of media systems, and to link this to studies of how artworks are adapted from one media to another: In this case, from song to short video.

Recent changes are located within a longer history of the Sinophone popular music world, contributing new knowledge about the understudied work of personnel involved in artist acquisition and development, adding to studies of the Chinese music industry since the reforms of the 1980s and emergence of digital platforms during the 21st century (Chen, 2021; Li, 2014; Shen et al., 2019). We hope our geographical focus on this period in Chinese music, media and cultural history will complement the wider scholarship that locates the emergence, influence and affordances of new media within longer time frames of commercial, organisational, technological, artistic and occupational change in the North Atlantic (Morris, 2015; Taylor, 2016) and Asia (Lee, 2009; Steinberg, 2019), particularly Asian perspectives that seek to challenge 'the dominant mode of platform studies that presume a global geography for US-based examples' (Steinberg and Li, 2017: 173). We also build upon more detailed studies of how new media transform interrelationships of musicians, company personnel, and listeners in different music industries (Nordgård, 2018; Prey, 2020; Tintiangko et al., 2023). Given the period covered in the article, our approach is necessarily schematic and selective, adopting the framing device of the transition from cultural intermediary to platform adaptor. We narrate a historical shift from the cultural mediations of record company planning staff and towards the media ecologies of platform adaptors, within the context of significant social, economic, and cultural changes that have taken place in China during this period.

The research reported here draws on secondary sources, industry documents and archives, samples of contracts, and 22 qualitative, naturalistic, conversational interviews with staff working for or who previously worked for Chinese companies, platforms, and music industry organisations. All interviews were conducted by Qian Zhang in Chinese. Completed over 2020–2023, most interviews were conducted online through video due to COVID restrictions, with four being face-to-face. Interviews allowed for issues to be explored, and to gain insights into perspectives, practices and processes, and for this to inform the article. Follow up interviews, messages, and emails were used by both authors (in Chinese and English) to clarify issues.

The words of our interviewees, spoken in different dialogic encounters, were not treated as a bounded collection of 'data' but as accounts of individual's partial knowledge of the world, recalled and reconstructed by that person when responding to questions, in specific circumstances. The interviewees' recollections and reconstructions of their past experiences and observations are mediated by the nuances of descriptions, concepts, and narratives, and are catalysed in a particular dialogic context as the life of the individual is intertwined with social change (Huang, 2023). Our starting point was that social, cultural, and historical research with people requires a hermeneutic and interpretative approach. Interviews are conducted with people who have their own theoretical and conceptual understandings of the world. As researchers we draw from the intersubjective and reciprocal interplay between interviewee's vernacular understandings and explanations of their musical, creative and organisational activities and the more formal concepts and theories developed by scholars, without wishing one to be more authoritative than the other (Clifford, 1988).

When reviewing and seeking to draw out insights and details from interviews, we brought these into dialogue with other voices, texts, and representations to create a conceptually structured narrative. In doing this, we followed James Clifford's (1988) anthropology of 'open-ended, creative dialogue' with 'native informants' (p. 46), Derek Scott's (2010) 'inter-textual' critical musicology, and Yingying Huang's (2023) reflective approach to how 'the oral becomes history'. We systematically went through each interview, discussing the details, and related these to other sources and our accumulated knowledge of this period in China and music industry history. The idea of the shift from intermediary to adaptor was suggested as a conceptual framework by Qian Zhang when we were reflecting upon and seeking to organise and structure a much longer detailed chronology.

We have been economical with direct quotes from interviewees, contextualising these and connecting their voices to other discussions of the same or related practices. Our decision not to quote extensively is partly epistemological, but mainly a pragmatic decision to present the overall history, dynamics and changes during this time rather than focus on details of one period. We have attempted to reference all specific sources throughout, and indicated where we have condensed material derived from many interviews into a summary of practices and processes. Institutional and disciplinary ethical codes were followed. All interviewees consented and were aware they were contributing to an academic study. Where requested, we have cited interviewees anonymously – this tends to be the case with those currently or recently working in companies where they must respect non-disclosure agreements and codes of confidentiality.

Artists and repertoire acquisition and music planning: conceptual and geographical contexts

The acquisition of performers, composers, and producers, and their creations, has been essential for music industries since the introduction of sound recording, yet received little sustained research. In English language writing, the occupation responsible for signing acts became known as artist and repertoire (hereafter A & R). Keith Negus and Dave Laing (2003),

summarising sources to the late 1990s, identified three A & R roles: the 'talent scout' who finds and brings artists and compositions to a company, a 'facilitator' arranging collaborations and support, and an 'interventionist' involved in selecting material, hiring musicians, and shaping a performer's music and image. In a UK case study, Negus (1992) outlined conflicts between A&R and other occupational groups, notably marketing, and argued that the British music industry of the time was dominated by a culture where white male rock bands were prioritised over other genres. Later studies highlighted how different local tensions, hierarchies, and values influenced artist acquisition in post-communist Czech popular music (Elavsky, 2005), Greek hip hop (Elafros, 2013), and K-pop (Kim, 2011; Shin, 2009).

Work on artist acquisition from the pre-digital era has been extended in studies of the influence of new media in Poland (Galuszka and Wyrzykowska, 2017), Norway (Maasø and Hagen, 2019), and the United States (Arditi, 2020). All add to knowledge of how music industry personnel pay less attention to visiting venues and listening to 'demos' and seek acts and repertoire by studying metrics and data, accessing video platforms, and monitoring social media (Prey, 2020). Galuszka and Wyrzykowska (2017) highlight how face-to-face encounters with people in retail, studios, venues, and managers – still significant in the early 2000s (Zwaan and ter Bogt, 2009) – are superseded by 'virtual A & R networks' as staff participate in and observe social media. Regional cultures and local values become less important as online reactions become as significant to decision making as the responses in a small club.

In briefly summarising these English language writings, we note that the phrase A & R originated in the United States during the 1930s, and that an equivalent French occupation developed as *directeur artistique* (Hennion, 1989; Negus and Laing, 2003). Like Laing (2009), other writers (Fung, 2019) emphasise how anglophone terms for genres, occupations and even the term popular music, are not universal but subject to regional variations and translations. In China, the equivalent occupation to A & R developed differently to that described by scholars in Europe and the United States, and became known by the localised term 'planning' (*qihua*, 企划) with artist and song acquisition being one part of an integrated process that bridged the 'talent scout', 'facilitator' and 'interventionist', and connected creative practices, commercial markets and socio-cultural contexts (as we will discuss in the following sections).

Significantly, music planning emerged as a mediating occupation in China at a time when scholars in Europe (Bourdieu, 1984; Featherstone, 1991; Hennion, 1989; Negus, 1992) were characterising music industry workers as a new type of intermediary, stressing the articulations of production-consumption, and moving away from comparisons with assembly lines, systems of 'gatekeepers' and organisational variables. This article brings the work of Chinese music industry personnel into dialogue with scholarship on artist acquisition, and media workers as intermediaries, located within a particular historical and geographical context.

The emergence of recording industry planners as cultural intermediaries in the Sinophone popular music world

The dynamics of the Chinese music industries can be understood in terms of the Sinophone popular music world as a network of music production linking mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macau, as well as Singapore, parts of Malaysia and

other 'Sinitic-language communities and their expressions' (Shih, 2011: 716). This is not only because the main Sinitic languages (Mandarin, Yue, Hakka, etc.) circulate in these countries and regions, but due to the music industry's Greater China transnational system of production and marketing. Initially established by companies such as Rolling Stone and UFO in Taiwan, PolyGram in Hong Kong, and Ocean Butterfly in Singapore, this increased after China joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001 and major labels such as Sony, Warner, Universal, and EMI, established more permanently in the region. From the later years of the 20th century, perhaps starting with Teresa Teng during the 1980s, many artists (such as Jacky Cheung, Faye Wong, and Jay Chou) gained popularity due to cultural commonalities, creative and commercial exchanges, and linguistic interactions across the greater China region (Fung, 2007).

Within this emergent system of transnational cultural production, the planning occupation developed during the 1980s. A contrast to the 'planned economy' that dominated economics and culture since the founding of the PRC in 1949, it integrated music composition, poetics, production, and performance, with presentation of public persona, tied to an understanding of how songs and singers resonate with public sensibilities and circumstances. This approach was given impetus by the reforms announced in December 1978, and growth of a market for cassette tapes that was met initially by new semi-autonomous companies, the most significant being the state-owned Pacific Audio-Visual Company in Guangzhou, and the China Record Corporation with branches in various locations (Zhang, 2017).

At the time (early 1980s), a coordinating role was still accorded to 'music editors', an occupation prominent since 1949 within the apparatus of propaganda and censorship. During this transitionary period, 'editing' assumed more than ideological judgements and began to incorporate artistic decisions about lyrics, composition, arrangements and singing style, linked to attempts to understand the public as a nascent 'market' (Jin, 2002; Qian, 2016; Zhang, 2017). Many newly formed music companies were moving away from state-controlled industry and seeking to bridge the 'contradiction between the listeners' market choice of music products and the government's decision-making and oversight' (Qian, 2016: 61).

Within these changing social and political circumstances, music planners (*qihuaren*) can be viewed as a new type of cultural intermediary emerging within a specific Chinese context. The concept of cultural intermediaries, a focus of much scholarship, derives from Pierre Bourdieu's anthropology of social distinction in France, and denotes an emerging occupational group in capitalist economies after the Second World War. These were workers engaged in public presentation, representation and communication, bridging the arts and advertising, 'providing symbolic goods and services . . . in cultural production and organisation' (Bourdieu, 1984: 359). Cultural intermediaries blur prior occupational class boundaries, and legitimate their expertise with reference to life experiences and habitus, rather than formal qualifications and professional codes.

The idea of cultural intermediaries has been adapted to study occupations spanning production and consumption, economic practices and cultural values (Nixon and du Gay, 2002), with an emphasis on art, design, fashion, film and occupations blurring work/leisure, and personal taste/professional judgements (Fan, 2019; Negus, 2002). Although the term has been critiqued for being loosely applied as an inclusive 'catch-all' for

numerous 'cultural' activities (Maguire and Matthews, 2012: 5), it is useful for delineating specific practices, dynamics, and relationships, albeit acknowledging that Bourdieu intended his concepts to be 'thinking tools' rather than universally applicable theories. Here, we use the concept to explore the emergence of planning in China and to understand key dynamics of changing music industry practices. We build upon the most substantive account of new cultural intermediaries in China: Xiang Fan's (2019) study of the mediations of artistic value and practice in film and art cinema as reform afforded a renewed legitimacy to popular culture and facilitated the growth of a new socialist market economy.

To contextualise the emergence of cultural intermediaries, we must briefly note the consequences of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). This disrupted the education of millions of youths, 'sent down' to the countryside and mountains to work with and learn from the peasantry and rural poor, or recruited into construction and the army. Mao's reinterpretation of Marxism emphasised revolutionary change through the destruction and transformation of cultural symbols, values, art, artefacts, songs, and literature. As the Cultural Revolution gradually lost momentum, closing with Mao's death in 1976, millions of 'educated youth' returned to cities and their hometowns, newly attuned to the significance of culture and everyday art, more aware of social divisions, critical and constructive about their time away. Although many were disaffected and 'scarred' by their experiences, they were also seeking direction as restrictions on cultural activities were lifted. Many would produce acclaimed novels, films, art and music reflecting and remembering this period.

The end of the Cultural Revolution gave young people a sense of creative energy, and renewed optimism. This period was recognised by contemporary composers, musicians, artists and critics (Jin, 2002; Qian, 2011), and by subsequent historians (Xu, 2021), as one of *wenhua qimeng* ('cultural enlightenment') or 'second enlightenment' (Qian, 2011). Within months, the reforms announced by Deng Xiaoping brought more possibilities as state-run enterprises were reduced, entrepreneurialism endorsed, and consumption encouraged. The 'big three' of a refrigerator, washing machine and television were soon symbols of socialist modernisation, quickly joined by the portable cassette player (Zhang, 2017). Crucially, in terms of our narrative here, previously banned recordings were back on the radio and being circulated on cassette, original songs being created and a new music industry was emerging, populated by composers, lyricists, musicians, producers and critics who had got through the Cultural Revolution by concealing or privatising their individual and collective music making (Jin, 2002).

Within this context, music planning developed as an intermediary occupation in mainland China. As restrictions gradually eased on personal contacts and imported recordings, so people working with artists began to be influenced by Hong Kong and Taiwan record labels and production practices. The Taiwanese popular music industry was given impetus by Rolling Stone Records, formed by the Duan brothers in 1981 while Taiwan was under martial law, and by UFO Records, established the following year. Blending international folk and rock idioms with vernacular styles, songs were created using the languages of the Island to express distinct Taiwanese perspectives and identities, to comment upon current affairs and to connect with sentiments for change (Tsai et al., 2020). The end of martial law in 1987 facilitated further growth of the Taiwan

recording industry as albums were crafted to connect the mood of a song collection and persona of an artist with public sensibilities.

A distinct intermediary activity emerged at the intersection of these historic social and political reforms, on both the Mainland and Taiwan. The practices of planners as intermediaries carried communal legacies. Markets were more than arenas of economic transactions, conspicuous consumption and social distinction, as emphasised in Bordieuan notions of cultural production. Markets were made and shaped according to broader collective sensibilities and existential experiences.

When interviewed for a Taiwan Broadcasting System documentary, Wang Fanggu, the vice-general manager of Rolling Stone Records, referred to the 'planning oriented era' of Taiwan's recording industry that developed during the 1980s as one that integrated artist and song acquisition, production, marketing and 'social climate' (TBS, 2011). He likened planning meetings to 'think tanks' where ideas collided as discussions about lyrics, album covers, forms of expression and the social roles of singers would merge into a unifying concept, oriented towards the media of television, radio, print, and cassette tape. For example, Lo Dayou's influential first album *Zhi hu zhe ye* (a play on four auxiliary words of Chinese) was planned to connect with sensibilities on both the Mainland and Taiwan, linking classical poetry to campus song, incorporating a poetic reaction to the rapid urbanisation of the township of Lukang and a lament for lost youth in the song 'Tong Nian' ('Childhood').

The planning profession grew during the 1990s as musicians, lyricists and industry people moved from the thriving music businesses of Taiwan and Hong Kong, starting labels or joining companies, and facilitating cross border exchanges (dynamics discussed by interviewees who worked in the industry at the time). During the early 1990s, the entertainment economy of Hong Kong boomed, the 14th Chinese Communist Party (CPC) National Congress in 1992 approved the further development of a socialist market economy, and Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour increased business confidence, fostering investment in numerous production companies such as Chia Tai Ice Music, Earth Records, and Red Star Production House. At the same time, Magic Stone Records, a subsidiary of Taiwan's Rolling Stone, established operations in Beijing, producing rock acts such as Zhangchu, Heyong, and Douwei.

As these exchanges grew, industry practitioners from Hong Kong and Taiwan influenced the work of Mainland planners. For example, Li Guangping jointly set up the first planning department of a state-owned audio-visual company to sign artists at the China Record Corporation Guangzhou Branch in 1991. A literature graduate before joining the industry, while working as a planner he wrote the lyrics to many acclaimed songs, such as 'Ni Zai Ta Xiang Hai Hao Ma?' ('Are You Okay in Another Region?') and 'Chaoshidexin' ('Damp Heart'). When interviewed in 2023, he recalled his role models as Chen Lerong of Taiwan's UFO Records, another admired lyricist and singer during the 1980s, and Xiang Xuehuai of PolyGram Hong Kong, again a recognised lyricist who worked as producer and planner in the vibrant polyglot Cantopop music business that thrived between the early 1970s and mid 1990s. Li's own practices were influenced by his mentors' multifaceted intermediary activities as creators, interventionists, and facilitators.

For example, Li discovered singer Li Chunbo at a Guangzhou dance hall and worked to present him as an ordinary person, wearing glasses and a cap, rather than as a distant

high-profile star. The 1993 song 'Xiao Fang', although seemingly another sentimental love song, was set in the period when young people were sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. Tackling disruption and facing the harsh realities of rural life, many fell in love and developed romantic relationships with local people, sadly having to separate when returning to the city. The song narrated this experience and was profoundly popular, its emotive recollections encoding a multi-faceted history of cultural memories. Presented as an urban folk ballad, the song resonated with the early 1990s wave of contemporary nostalgia for the seemingly more innocent experiences of youth during the Cultural Revolution at a time when further uncertainties were being experienced as the regenerated post-1989 market economy disrupted many lives anew.

Hence, planners were engaged in intermediary activity as 'go-between' but were doing more than mediating market criteria and articulating social divisions. Music planners were playing a mediating role as people came to terms with collective historical experiences, while searching for a sense of contemporary identity, and connecting with an enduring poetic tradition tracing back to classical Chinese verse (lyrics and lyricists being particularly valued in the Sinophone popular music world). Embedded in and responding to historical circumstances in China at the time, this is much more than the facilitator of social distinctions as suggested by Bordieuan notions of cultural intermediaries. Chinese music planners were mediating the creation of recorded music at the intersection of political, artistic and economic changes and with an acute awareness of these historical circumstances.

This point was illuminated further by Shen Lihui, musician, art designer, songwriter and singer of the band Sober; one of many creative practitioners born during the Cultural Revolution whose artistic sensibilities were shaped in the post-Revolution years of creative ferment and critical reflection when a distinct type of music planning emerged. Shen founded Modern Sky Records in 1997 and, although not formally labelled as a planner (being CEO), was involved in all aspects of the artistic and commercial process. When interviewed in 2022, he remembered, 'In the old days, there were times when I would hate the musician, but I signed them because I had a collector's mindset in terms of making a specimen slice of the era'. Referring to recordings released between 1997 and 1999 as representatives of their time: 'Modern Sky has always been a collector, kind of like a museum mindset . . . and some of the records didn't need to make money at all'.

Not only was signing musicians more than a commercial decision, it was also one aspect of an integrated system. Planners linked together business and markets, participation in lyric writing and composition, promotion and publicity, and all aspects of an artistic career. There are clear similarities with the music industries of Japanese J-pop, and South Korean K-pop, where individuals blur and cross the boundaries between the roles of 'songwriter-arranger, recording engineers, managers, design coordinators', a type of cultural production with 'East Asian characteristics . . . that . . . cannot easily be found outside the region' (Shin, 2009: 510).

These shared East Asian characteristics became more pronounced during the early 2000s with the influence of the Korean wave, and integration of TV talent shows into the music industry. In 2004, Hunan Satellite TV launched *Chaoji Nu sheng* (*Super Girl)*, auditioning tens of thousands of applicants and allowing viewers to 'vote' from their mobile phones. The following year, Li Yuchun won the contest and began a career

as Chris Lee. *Super Girl* marked a pivotal moment as voting fans were integrated into the music industry, and talent shows – such as *Zhongguo You Xiha* (*The Rap of China)*, *Yueduidexiatian* (*The Big Band*) – became a source of singers and songs (Wang and de Kloet, 2016). The publicly announced search for talent and the idea of listeners 'electing' new stars became integrated into music production as the digital economy advanced.

During this period, the intermediary role of the planner became less influential, and the more narrowly focused media adaptor began emerging, facilitated by the expansion of digital mobile media and the impact of big tech. When interviewed in 2022, Zhan Hua, who was responsible for planning at Red Star House, recalled the importance of the recording company and planner, and how this changed: 'I received all kinds of self-recommended artists every day. They came from all over the country, and brought their songbooks, held their guitars, and brought demos, or maybe they didn't even have any demos'. He emphasised the dedication of what he called 'self-recommended' musicians: 'There were even those who rode bicycles from Hebei, rode all day from morning to evening, rode to our company, sang us two songs, and then rode home again'. The reason for such effort was that 'a record label was pretty much the only channel for a musician to become famous'. With the introduction of the Internet and digital recording 'the threshold of production was lowered. Many young people make their own songs at home . . . there was less need for record labels in production'.

Digital music technologies were being introduced at a time when the growing socialist market economy had raised living standards, allowing the consolidation of a conspicuous urban consumer, yet within a stratified 'middle class' marked by distinctions between those struggling on the margins and others amassing wealth and assets (Li, 2021). Occupational divisions had grown more pronounced since the earlier days of market reforms when cultural intermediaries emerged. As new digital platforms attempted to acquire musicians and repertoire, as we now illustrate, working roles were also reconfigured in relation to these social divisions and by an underlying shift in corporate power and influence that began moving the arrows of influence from cultural production at record companies to content delivery by Internet service providers.

Digital transitions and the transformation of music planning as platforms compete to sign musicians

In the early 2000s, Internet companies grew in China, as elsewhere in the world, without regard for the interests of copyright holders. Baidu became China's largest and one of many businesses allowing users to share music mp3s. Within this context, the company Xiami would briefly influence an approach to artist acquisition that sought to combine the practices of a record company (selecting, intervening, and presenting musicians) with methods of tech platforms (unselectively chasing abundant quantities of 'users' and 'content'). Xiami occupies a significant moment during a historical shift away from the more expansive cultural mediations of record company planning staff and towards the narrower media ecologies of platform adaptors. Before addressing this shift more conceptually, we outline key aspects of this transition.

Xiami was launched in 2007 by ex-engineers from Alibaba, led by Wang Hao who played in and promoted bands while at college, using a widely adopted 'business model' that entailed variations on 'sharing' or 'peer to peer' without regard for copyright – equally integral to the success of Napster in the United States, and impetus for Spotify in Sweden. Xiami was the first platform in China to encourage musicians to upload mp3 recordings as an acquisition strategy to build catalogue, using 'project teams' to assess and deliver a verdict within 7 working days (Shen et al., 2019).

Although providing opportunities for musicians, it illustrated the tensions as tech companies (seeking 'content' to circulate to 'users') collided with record companies and musicians (seeking to maintain control over and gain revenues from the music rights). By uploading recordings, musicians gave Xiami copyright in their work and authority to disseminate their music through all media, consented not to agree deals with other websites, and warranted that recordings did not infringe broadcast and legal rights. Xiami agreed to pass on all net income, through a complex of percentages for lyrics, musical composition, production, publishing, and third-party stakes (Shen et al., 2019), and after the company took 25% of download fees (Xiang, 2013).

In certain respects, Xiami operated like a talent scout, adopted a largely non-interventionist approach to music creation, and acted as a conventional media gatekeeper. Although staff presented musicians conceptually online, the focus was on microgenres, market segments and media, rather than the broader social and cultural sensibilities encouraged by planners. One ex-Xiami employee, who later worked at NetEase, remembered her role as constantly monitoring trends and constructing playlists with themes targeted at listeners, such as songs for the 'eve of college entrance exams' (personal interview, 2023). Playlists were sometimes released as albums. In 2014, Xiami announced a compilation album of acts entitled *Xun Guang Ji* (*Searching for Light Collection*), presented by the company as 'the first internet record in China', declaring it to be 'initiated and released by an internet platform, featuring musicians who are internet users, and only promoted online'. It was indicative of how values and practices from IT and big tech were beginning to reshape intermediary work in the recording industry.

Yet, Xiami hit problems for failing to enforce copyright. Labels and rights holders requested payments for royalties, or removal of tracks, and international companies demanded fees the company found unaffordable. As in other parts of the world, users were shifting from purchasing downloads to streaming and Xiami began to seek revenue from advertising (Xiang, 2013). The attempt to bridge record label and platform dissipated as Alibaba, who acquired the company in 2013, closed it down in 2021.

Xiami's difficulties were compounded as copyright was more stringently enforced by China's National Copyright Administration (as it was by states around the world). Internet companies realised that copyrighted music led to revenue being 'lost'. Yet, equally, profits could be generated by owning recording rights. Hence, following Xiami's example, various platforms began introducing schemes designed to acquire content, building further on the legacies of competitive auditions for talent.

Although many companies introduced schemes to attract unsigned musicians, including Taihe Music, the most significant competition was between NetEase Cloud Music, founded in 2013 (part of the NetEase Corporation, formed in 1997) and Tencent music, formed in 2016 (part of the Tencent corporation, founded in 1998). NetEase trialled

signing musicians directly in 2013, encouraged by Music Director Wang Lei, relying on interpersonal networks within the industry when acquiring rock musicians such as Zuoxiao Zuzhou, Miserable Faith, and Yu Yang. After this, NetEase publicised various calls for talent, such as *LiXiang Yinyueren Jihua* (Ideal Musician Project) in 2015, promising the top signings 'celebrity mentors, music promotion resources and music sharing sessions', and *Shitou Jihua* (Stone Plan) in 2016, providing support for promotion, recording and performance. Tencent followed NetEase by introducing schemes that offered similar inducements clustered within an overall Musicians Programme covering varied genres from 'indie' to traditional folk and Chinese dialectic music.

In 2019, NetEase reported more than 100,000 musicians signed since 2013, and over 1.5 million original works acquired. By 2021, it had procured the rights to over 400,000 musicians, rising to 600,000 in 2022 (NetEase, 2019, 2022). Quantity of signings was presented as an indicator of value and to encourage investment; used when NetEase was listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange. By 2021, Tencent announced that it contracted over 300,000 musicians, rising by 80,000 during 2022 and encompassing 2.3 million original works (Tencent, 2021, 2022a).

Although these schemes offered aspiring artists access to the music industries, it is misleading to assume, as some industry commentators did, that these musicians were 'self-releasing' (Qu et al., 2021). They were only self-releasing their music to a platform for approval, or not. In many ways, these aspiring artists were a newer online version of what Zhan Hua called 'self-recommended musicians', using an Internet connection rather than a bicycle. They were subject to gatekeeping and evaluation, resulting in acceptance or rejection, and the tracks 'released' by NetEase or Tencent, as they were by Xiami. Rather than having a form of autonomy to 'self-release', these schemes illustrated just how quickly musicians had become 'platform dependent' (Nieborg and Poell, 2018). The process entailed initial automated filtering of tracks for rights infringement and sonic quality, followed by human checking, and then standard rejection messages for 'failing to pass the review' or offers of contracts (as explained by interviewees who wished to remain anonymous, and observed in documents and messages shown to us in confidence).

Like the Xiami agreements, referenced earlier, a basic deal covered 6 months, gave the platform all rights to works (music and lyrics) 'in perpetuity', and automatically renewed for the same period if neither party objected within 60–30 days of the deadline. The platform had options to initiate 'buyout' clauses and decide any discretionary payments to artists. While most deals expired, some led to detailed contracts specifying quantities of songs to be delivered and duration for the 'permanent transfer of copyright in musical works', the 'transfer fee' (variable), and complex percentage shares of different revenues according to media (download or stream) and stakeholders in composition, lyrics, and production. Contracts covered geographical scope (customarily worldwide), and included clauses requiring no work to be submitted that is 'detrimental to the national interest' and forbidding reference to drugs, pornography, and gambling. Agreements concluded with confidentiality clauses (hence we cite these anonymously without details of named musicians).

The competition among platforms to acquire intellectual property rights to thousands of musicians was motivated by the metrical rationality of tech companies rather than the

musical reasoning of record labels – an assumption that quantity of rights was an indication of corporate value. As our interviewees explained, this was reassessed during 2022 as staff realised that huge quantities of recordings were neither generating traffic, engagement with users, nor revenue.

Even though many workers at Xiami, Tencent, and NetEase, had graduate and postgraduate qualifications in music, media, and arts subjects and were creative practitioners, platforms (emerging from the tech and IT industry) had no legacy of music planning, nor resources allocated to work creatively with such quantities of musicians. The platforms had an unrealistic approach to signing artists, oblivious to the imaginative human work entailed. The more successful musicians negotiated moves to traditional labels or formed their own companies. Platforms refocused on 'active users' as indicator of value and policy shifted towards acquiring songs and tracks rather than artists.

One other major factor influenced this policy shift. This might be called the Douyin or TikTok effect: The impact of short video platforms on cultural production, on how musicians and their listeners interact, and upon creativity and cultural life in China more generally (de Kloet et al., 2019). By the time we were completing this article during 2023, the platforms were moving categorically away from signing musicians and towards acquiring and constructing repertoire.

The emergence of content operators: adapting to the ecologies of platforms

The professional role of the music planner was transformed and partly absorbed by an occupation usually called a 'content operator' (sometimes content developer). Planning was a key cultural intermediary occupation because it integrated an entire process of artists and artworks, producers and consumers, musicians and markets, creativity and commerce – conceptually linked in the act of acquisition and artist development, attuned to broader historical sensibilities. It developed at a time of cassette tapes and print media when occupations were being forged anew during the often-improvisatory growth of an emergent socialist market economy.

Platform adaptors in the 2020s are subdivided into various teams, such as content planning (where planning legacies endure), content production, content editor, external authorisation, content marketing, content signing and copyright team. These staff occupy an equally transformed social world. China's exponential economic growth has levelled out, a growing middle class is stratified by occupation, geographical location, and market access. Work is more precarious and susceptible to economic shocks. Labour has moved online into a sphere where young people work across several jobs rather than in one unit (Li, 2021). The generational experience of workers at platforms is signalled in debates around the contested identity of *houlang* – 'the back wave' of those born during and since the 1990s and growing up with Internet, computers and mobile phones. Unlike earlier planners who were 'educated' as sent down youth in the countryside, this is a generation whose experience of education is of pressurised test-based schooling. One outcome is a utilitarian attitude to work, attention to the micro rather than macro, and anxiety of perpetual evaluation through key performance indicators (KPIs). Meanwhile, leisure time is

enacted through avatastic skins in online circles where the invasive digital surveillance of states and corporations is ever present. Unlike the cultural intermediaries of the 1980s reform period of 'cultural enlightenment', values are cynically 'post-idealist', work is precarious, and media platforms prefer people who can processes technical information, rather than those with a wider knowledge of humanities, arts, and social life (se Li, 2021; Xu, 2021).

Our argument here is that adaptors inhabit a 'platform ecology' of digital media dependencies, with different affordances according to specific platform ecosystems. We use the term ecology cautiously, following its vernacular use by staff within the media industries in China (Chen, 2021), and scholars emphasising technologically shaped media environments. There is now a huge quantity of academic and managerial writing on media 'ecology', from 1960s print through to games and digital platforms in the 2020s, emphasising interdependencies within systems of media and technology. The adoption of this metaphor in scholarship traces back to Neil Postman's (1973) stress on communication within 'technologically-created environments' (p. 8). Although the ecological approach to media has been criticised for being applied in a functionalist and deterministic manner, and for assuming bounded systems, we find the very narrowness of the concept useful as a thinking tool. It conveys a sense of the confined practices of platform adaptors and allows us to contrast this with the more expansive outlook of planners as cultural intermediaries.

Taken with the ecology metaphor, the term adaptor unavoidably alludes to how species adjust to changing environments – a naturalising analogy that cannot be pushed too far in understanding broader tensions and struggles in working lives and industries. That limitation noted, we connect the metaphor of the adaptor to critical studies of creative adaptation 'from one work of art to the next', aware of the need to understand this according to the 'political and ideological contexts within which adaptation takes place' (Hassler-Forest and Nicklas, 2015: 1). Within these circumstances, music staff at platforms adapt in two senses of the term: adapting to the organisational systems of technological-media ecologies, and adapting songs to mainly short video platforms. The following section condenses and summarises details from discussions with staff who wished to remain anonymous.

Platforms coordinate the supply of musical content in two broad ways, although details and platform affordances vary slightly between companies. One is by acquiring tracks and songs that exist in some form already. The other entails initiating a project internally. The platform staff responsible for acquiring and producing content tend to be divided into production groups or internally competing 'studios' (in NetEase Cloud this would include Qingyun, Yunshang, Chaoliu, and several others), comprising many small teams of collaborators who may draw on external expertise. These units compete by constructing projects in response to trends detected among users, by analysing the characteristics of the most successful songs, and by monitoring the semantic content of online discussion.

In acquiring tracks, the aim is to find a recording that will be a hit, preferably a song suited to renditions by different singers. Staff judge tracks for their potential to have the vocals removed and used as background music (an option factored into contracts), and

for possible use in games, sports, adverts, and social media (particularly media and services owned by the corporation).

Staff search for talent online and through social media, monitoring real-time trends on Douyin and Bilibili, and also receive recordings from known 'suppliers'. Indexes of songs and musicians provide a staple tool of repertoire evaluation and acquisition. During the earlier rush to sign artists, the Musician Index was a primary source, providing indicators of the frequency and type of *interaction* between musicians and followers, incentivising artists to engage with users and encouraging listeners to post comments. The shift from signing musicians to acquiring tracks led staff to use similar indices of song popularity.

Content operators within the content planning team monitor quantity of plays, paying attention to tracks receiving over 100,000 per day, and look for upwards trends, cross referencing with the social media presence of composers and producers. The company may locate a recording that can be acquired and released, but more usually are seeking potential hit songs that can be recorded in many versions by other singers, and used across multiple media – synchronised as accompaniment in videos of dance, pets, changing clothes or humorous skits. A song may be used in thousands of short videos. Unlike ambient music or muzak, the rhythms, lyrics, and melodies of tracks used as 'background' in short videos are not created to be unobtrusive but to contribute a dialogic sonic context for the action. A track is judged for its capacity to afford a contrapuntal, frequently ironic, interplay with the audio-visual rhythms of dancing, gestures, imagery and narrative.

Contracts for individual songs usually give the platform options to request changes to lyrics and titles (to appear in more searches), and for producers to allow backing tracks to be released as beats. During our research, a basic contract included a transfer fee of between 20,000 and 50,000 RMB, a royalty of around 30% of net revenues, and covered worldwide rights for the duration of copyright. Previously successful creators can negotiate higher fees and larger percentages.

The alternative to finding material is to initiate projects in response to trends detected among users, particularly by monitoring the semantic content of online discussion, a characteristic of the NetEase platform affordances referred to by staff as the 'commenting ecology'. This provides a resource for conducting 'sentiment analysis' of reviews and discussions. Platforms continually prompt users to comment upon songs, encouraging composers to draw from this data and to 'reflect' these moods back to listeners.

NetEase Cloud Music encourages users to submit stories and songwriters to 'tell stories'. For example, the platform introduced the *Reping Zhizao Jihua* (Hot Review Production Programme) in 2021, providing themes, asking users to provide stories, and getting songwriters to select from these when composing lyrics. In September 2021, the platform solicited personal experiences from users in response to the keyword 'embrace' and collected story materials for musicians. One result was the poetic song 'Xiang Jiao Xian' ('Intersecting Lines') composed by Lin Zhanqiu, a NetEase Cloud musician, the lyrics evoking an unrequited love that failed to embrace (personal interview, 2023). Other projects have asked users to post personal experiences triggered by the themes 'hugs', 'dear', 'crushes', 'first love' and 'lost love', as well as about seasonal festivals and family celebrations, like Mother's Day. In addition to themed projects, user stories

are compiled into an indexed *Ling Gan Jia You Zhan* (Inspiration Fuel Station) and made available to NetEase musicians who are encouraged to draw creatively from the pool of stories according to the platform's model of user popularity, with priority given to groupings such as love, friendship, positive energy, emo (sad, emotional experiences), affection, nostalgia, waiting, youthful confusion, compassion, and worship.

Although mainly concerned with songs and tracks that can be streamed on the company's services and promoted on short video apps, the platforms occasionally collect recordings together and release them as themed albums. Here, we can detect traces from the record planning era, yet more narrowly focused on market segmentation, short video media, genre and metrics. For example, in 2021, staff at NetEase Cloud Music launched a compilation album called *Lianlian Jishiben* (*Love Notebook*) and invited niche bands and those with a fan base to recreate versions of 'classic songs' from 1980 to 2005. The idea was to bring older songs into young people's lives with a new sound. Included was Hui Chun Dan's version of 'Chu Lian' ('First Love'), a song previously released by Hong Kong singer Lam Chi Mei in 1984, adapted from the Japanese song of the same name composed by Kozo Murakushita and widely known through Karen Mok's rendition in the film *God of Cookery*. The Hui Chun Dan version was adapted for the short video platform categories of 'background music', 'hot dance', and 'changing clothes', incorporating lighter rhythms and retro disco elements. The team of adaptors deliberately set the lyrics 'I look forward to meeting her every minute, silently waiting and never complaining' as a climax passage suited to the length of a short video. The recording reportedly received 10,000 comments in the first hour of its online streaming, attracting users and generating further semantic data (Personal interview, 2023).

Although we might detect traces of planning in the construction of a themed concept album, this is an illustration of the effects and affordances of the Douyin ecosystem – targeted at short videos and generating user responses that can be collected as statistical metrics and semantic data. Our final illustration of the shift from cultural intermediary to platform adaptor.

Concluding reflections: moments, memories and the unfinished history of the Chinese music industries

Staff working as planners at labels in the 1980s and 1990s were recruited for their musical knowledge, passions, and creative involvement in music making, much like many staff at platforms in the 2020s. When acquiring songs and artists and initiating projects, the planner's role involved flexibility, diplomacy and teamwork, bringing together the practices of lyric writing, composition, production, and integrating this with presentation, publicity, and marketing. Echoes of this resound in the practices of content operatives as their work at platforms carry legacies from earlier days of the Sinophone popular music industry.

Yet, such legacies belie significant contrasts. Older staff involved in the label planning era often recalled a sense of excitement and fulfilment associated with their contribution to innovative musical styles, whether the Northwest wind from which Cui Jian emerged, or Hong Kong Cantopop, or Taiwanese campus song and rock. This sense of

fulfilment was recalled by people we interviewed and can also be found in published memoirs and unpublished accounts in archives.

When researching and writing this article, we were aware of how such historical recollections during interviews can become nostalgic (Huang, 2023). However, the observations and descriptions of practices provided by our interviewees were cross-referenced against contemporary sources and are consistent with the work of Chinese sociologists and historians of change during this period (Li, 2021; Xu, 2021), and Lijuan Qian's (2011) detailed analysis of songs, production, and composition that is drawn from rigorous study of numerous contemporary accounts and sources. Qian's scholarship illustrates how the practices of musicians and producers, and the musical and lyrical content of pop songs during the 1980s, were able to creatively articulate the 'cultural enlightenment' and reflexive humanism associated with the post-Cultural Revolution period.

Our research with staff acquiring songs and working with musicians at contemporary platforms suggests a tension between the satisfaction achieved by contributing to successful tracks and artists, and a sense of frustration that can override such moments of fulfilment. Here again, this is consistent with scholarship on developments in work, occupations, and social life in China (Li, 2021; Xu, 2021), and Fangjun Li's (2014) and Zhen Troy Chen's (2021) detailed studies of the transformations of the Chinese music industries since digitalisation. One person's vexation was summed up in the remark, 'I cannot use my ears. I cannot argue with the metrics'. Another commented, 'Human subjectivity is being eroded – musicians are signed, songs are bought, and songs are made, judged on the basis of data first'.

Such frustrations arise because people do not live within data or solely as online avatars. Music is lived in relationships with other fans, friends, family and personal networks. In September 2022, at a Tencent Research Roundtable, Liushui Ji, a respected music critic, spoke for peers involved in popular music production by paraphrasing the response of a friend to a recent song: 'I listen this this song every day. First, I don't know the title of the song. Second, I don't know the singer. Third, I don't know the whole song'. Yet Ji observed further that those 15 seconds had 'burned a deep mark in their hearts. It's also had some influence on our listening habits as well'. He then went on to mention that the song 'Love Party' gained success because the lyrical fragment 'Good night baby, what time are you going to bed today?' was used in 'secondary communication': 'Was the song a hit?' Very much so. Are the numbers good? Very good. But does it have much to do with the singing, arrangement, and the production of the song itself? It doesn't seem to me that it has much to do with the song itself (Tencent, 2022b).

Ji's observations provide an apt comment on the consequences of the changes we have been narrating. In a short period of time, Chinese platforms shifted from scrambling to sign vast numbers of musicians and their repertoire to contracting individual songs for their potential to be broken into 15-second fragments and used as sonic context in multiple short videos. This inevitably favours specific sounds, singers, instruments, styles, and genres. Many musicians are excluded, not simply those making music for fun or producing unexceptional work that would never be signed, but those making music for anything other than a short video.

As previous studies of A & R have shown, all music and song acquisition practices are partial and privilege certain values, styles, identities, and cultural practices (Arditi, 2020;

Elavsky, 2005; Negus, 1992). What is present accentuates what is absent: Those who perform in a more traditional context of live venues and scenes, or who make music that cannot be accommodated to short videos. While staff we spoke with in Chinese platforms occasionally disparaged traditional record companies for their 'slacker culture' and for not understanding the intensity and speed of the short video business, there is clearly a place for the traditional music company in which the creative, conceptual and social sensibilities of the planner may endure. Modern Sky, for example, mentioned earlier, responded to the decline in revenues from recording by becoming involved in music festivals where the 'collector's mindset' and sense of history is realised in presenting a wide range of musical styles, from successful live rock bands to traditional ensembles performing music associated with different regional and ethnic groups (Zhang, 2021).

The narrative of transformation we have outlined in this article is part of a much longer history. We have inevitably presented a schematic narrative, using the conceptual thinking tools of the 'cultural intermediary' and 'platform adaptor' to illustrate a series of significant changes. This is an account of one period in the Chinese music industry and Sinophone popular music world, tracing the changing role of planners, and adding to the scholarship on artist and repertoire acquisition. We have concluded with personnel at music platforms adapting to the impact of short videos.

While digital platforms profited from the pandemic when communication and creativity was forced online, they may be challenged as traditional live scenes and music festival circuits remerge from forced closure and are re-established. The deference of platform pop to short videos may be a short episode within the longer, unfolding history of Chinese popular music, its creators, and its industries.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Qian Zhang discloses receipt of the following support for the research for this article: 2021 Humanities and Social Sciences Research Planning Project of Ministry of Education, Study on the Formation and Transformation of China's Contemporary Music Culture Industry (Project Approval No. 21YJAZH119); and 2023 University-Level Project of Communication University of China, Research on Popular Music Production and Transformation of Musicians in China's Platformization (Project Approval No. CUC23GG10).

ORCID iDs

Qian Zhang https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4429-8833

Keith Negus https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3408-5551

References

Arditi D (2020) *Getting Signed: Record Contracts, Musicians, and Power in Society*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bourdieu P (1984) *Distinction*. London: Routledge.

Chen ZT (2021) *China's Music Industry Unplugged: Business Models, Copyright and Social Entrepreneurship in the Online Platform Economy*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

Clifford J (1988) *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

De Kloet J, Poell T, Guohua Z, et al. (2019) The platformization of Chinese society: infrastructure, governance, and practice. *Chinese Journal of Communication* 12(3): 249–256.

Elafros A (2013) Greek hip hop: local and transnational authentication in the restricted field of production. *Poetics* 41(1): 75–95.

Elavsky CM (2005) Producing 'local' repertoire: Czech identity, pop music, and the global music industry. PhD Thesis, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, IL.

Fan X (2019) The production of art cinema culture in China: an exploration of the role of cultural intermediaries. PhD Thesis, Goldsmiths College, London.

Featherstone M (1991) *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. London: Sage.

Fung A (2007) The emerging (national) popular music culture in China. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8(3): 425–437.

Fung A (2019) Between dislocated and relocated inter-Asian popular music studies: academic discourse and possibilities. *Popular Music* 38(1): 121–127.

Galuszka P and Wyrzykowska K (2017) Artist and repertoire goes online: evidence from Poland. *Media Industries* 4(1): 1–20.

Hassler-Forest D and Nicklas P (2015) Introduction. In: Hassler-Forest, D and Nicklas, P (eds) *The Politics of Adaptation: Media Convergence and Ideology*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1–4.

Hennion A (1989) An intermediary between production and consumption: the producer of popular music. *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 14(4): 400–424.

Huang Y (2023) Yuanhe 'koushu' heyi cheng 'shi'? Koushu shi de lichang wentiyishi yu mingan anxian (Why 'oral' and how to become 'history'? The position, problems, and lines of dark and light awareness in oral history). *Funuyanjiu Luncong (Women's Studies Series)* 5: 98–109.

Jin Z (2002) *Guang tian hua ri xia de liu xing* (Popularity in Broad Daylight). Beijing, China: People's Music Press.

Kim Y (2011) Idol republic: the global emergence of girl industries and the commercialisation of girl bodies. *Journal of Gender Studies* 20(4): 333–345.

Laing D (2009) World music and the global music industry: flows, corporations and networks. In: Pietilä, T (ed.) *World Music: Roots and Routes*. Helsinki: Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, pp. 14–33.

Lee JY (2009) Contesting the digital economy and culture: digital technologies and the transformation of popular music in Korea. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 10(4): 489–506.

Li F (2014) China's music industries: evolution, development and convergence. PhD Thesis, Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW, Australia.

Li Q (2021) Ershiyi Shiji Yilai Zhongguo Shehuifenceng Jiegou Bianqian de Tezheng yu Qushi (Characteristics and trends of the dramatic changes in China's social stratification in the last twenty years). *Hebei Journal* 4(5): 190–199.

Maasø A and Hagen AN (2019) Metrics and decision-making in music streaming. *Popular Communication* 18(1): 18–31.

Maguire JS and Matthews J (2012) Are we all cultural intermediaries now? *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 15(5): 551–562.

Morris JW (2015) *Selling Digital Music, Formatting Culture*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Negus K (1992) *Producing Pop: Culture and Conflict in the Popular Music Industry*. Sevenoaks: Edward Arnold.

Negus K (2002) The work of cultural intermediaries and the enduring distance between production and consumption. *Cultural Studies* 16(4): 501–515.

Negus K and Laing D (2003) A & R. In: Shepherd J, Horn D, Laing D, et al. (eds) *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World, Volume 1: Media, Industry and Society*. London: Continuum, p. 530.

NetEase (2019) NetEase musicians annual report. Available at: https://ir.netease.com/news-releases/news-release-details/netease-reports-fourth-quarter-and-fiscal-year-2019-unaudited

NetEase (2022) NetEase musicians annual report. Available at: https://krungthai.com/Download/generalcontent/MediaFile_38759NetEase,Inc.2022Annualreport.pdf

Nieborg D and Poell T (2018) The platformization of cultural production: theorizing the contingent cultural commodity. *New Media & Society* 20(11): 4275–4292.

Nixon S and du Gay P (2002) Who needs cultural intermediaries? *Cultural Studies* 16(4): 495–500.

Nordgård D (2018) *The Music Business and Digital Impacts*. Cham: Springer.

Postman N (1973) Media ecology: communication as context. *Keynote, Speech Communication Association Conference*, Chicago, IL, 12–14 July, pp. 12–13. New York: Speech Communication Association.

Prey R (2020) Performing numbers: musicians and their metrics. In: Stark D (ed.) *The Performance Complex: Competition and Competitions in Social Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 241–258.

Qian L (2011) *Pop Song Composition in China in the 1980s: An Elite Synthesis for the Mainstream*. PhD Thesis, University of Sheffield, Sheffield.

Qian L (2016) Guoji shengxiang – Jingji tizhi shiyanxiade yinyue gongye anli fenxi. (International Audio and Video Company: A Case Study from Music Industry under Economic Reform in China). *Journal of Xinghai Conservatory of Music* 143(2): 61–65.

Qu S, Hesmondhalgh D and Xiao J (2021) Music streaming platforms and self-releasing musicians: the case of China. *Information, Communication & Society* 26(4): 699–715.

Scott D (2010) *Musical Style and Social Meaning: Selected Essays*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Shen X, Zheng S, Liu Y, et al. (2019) *Online music in China*. CREATe Working paper, 2019-04. Glasgow: CREATe.

Shih SM (2011) The concept of the Sinophone. *PMLA* 126(3): 709–718.

Shin H (2009) Have you seen the rain? And who'll stop the rain? The globalizing project of Korean pop (K-pop). *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 10(4): 507–523.

Steinberg M (2019) *The Platform Economy: How Japan Transformed the Consumer Internet*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Steinberg M and Li J (2017) Introduction: regional platforms. *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 4: 173–183.

Taylor T (2016) *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

TBS (2011) Time's singing. Taiwan Broadcasting System, Episode 4, December. Available at: https://about.pts.org.tw/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/2011reportlow-res.pdf

Tencent (2021) Tencent musicians annual report. Available at: https://ir.tencentmusic.com/2022-04-26-Tencent-Music-Entertainment-Group-Filed-2021-Annual-Report-on-Form-20-F

Tencent (2022a) Tencent musicians annual report. Available at: https://ir.tencentmusic.com/2023-04-25-Tencent-Music-Entertainment-Group-Filed-2022-Annual-Report-on-Form-20-F

Tencent (2022b) *Melodic Change: How Algorithms are Changing the Pop World* (Dialogue Camp, 6 September). Tencent Research Institute, Beijing, China.

Tintiangko J, Fung A and Leo-Liu J (2023) Compelled TikTok creators? The ambivalent affordances of the short video app for Filipino musicians. *Media, Culture & Society* 45(8): 1600–1615.

Tsai E, Ho TH and Jian M (2020) Problematizing and contextualizing Taiwanese popular music. In: Tsai E, Ho TH and Jian M (eds) *Made in Taiwan: Studies in Popular Music*. London: Routledge, pp. 1–19.

Wang Q and de Kloet J (2016) From 'nothing to my name' to 'I am a singer': market, capital, and politics in the Chinese music industry. In: Keane M (ed.) *Handbook of Cultural and Creative Industries in China*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp. 293–310.

Xiang T (2013) Xiami story: an ideal online music model doesn't work for now. *Technode*, 13 January. Available at: https://technode.com/2013/01/13/xiami-story-an-ideal-online-music-model/ (accessed 15 March 2023).

Xu J (2021) Miandui Houlang Wenhua Ruhe Jiangwei Qimeng (How to Redimension the Enlightenment When Dealing with Houlang Culture). *Shanghai Culture* 10: 14–27.

Zhang Q (2017) 1978–1989 nyŏn sahoe ihaenggi ŭi chungguk ŭmak yŏngsang sanŏp kwa t'ongsok ŭmag ŭi hyŏngsŏng [The Formation of the Audio-visual Industry and Tongsu Music in the societal transitional Era of Mainland China (1978–1989)]. In: Shin H and Lee K (eds) *Pyŏnbang ŭi saund: Modŏnit'i wa Ashian p'abŭi chŏn'gae* [Sounds of the Peripheries: Modernity and the Development of Asian Pop]. Seoul: Ch'aeryun, pp. 193–219.

Zhang Q (2021) *Beijing Caomei: Laizi Xiangqian Sishibazhai de Yuanshengtai Shengyintiyan* [Beijing Strawberry: Original Ecological Sound Experience from 48 Villages in Guizhou and Hunan Province]. Beijing, China: Modern Sky. Available at: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/llGdkgqs8ZMtEcoqpUkGng (accessed 27 November 2023).

Zwaan K and ter Bogt TFM (2009) Research note: breaking into the popular record industry. *European Journal of Communication* 24(1): 89–101.

Author biographies

Qian Zhang is Associate Professor at the School of Music and Recording Art, Communication University of China (CUC), in Beijing, and was Visiting Scholar at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2018–2019. She specialises in Chinese popular music and the music industries. Her research includes studies of vernacular musics in China, yellow and red music during the Cold War, fandom and audiences, music genres and historical change, digitalization and social media, and contemporary soundscapes. She has published a monograph in Chinese, *Producing Popularity: The Formation and Transformation of China's Recorded Music Industry (2024)*.

Keith Negus works in the Department of Music, Goldsmiths, University of London. He entered higher education after playing keyboards and guitar in a range of bands, gaining a degree in Sociology, and completing a PhD study of the music industry. He taught at the Universities of Leicester and Puerto Rico, before joining Goldsmiths. His books include *Producing Pop* (1992), *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (1999), and *Bob Dylan* (2008). He is co-author of *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman (1996*, 2013).