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Platform-mediated live musical performance in China: New social practices and urban cultural spaces

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a non-Anglo-American geographical discussion of digitally mediated cultural activities. Taking China's live music industry as an entry point, we seek to theoretically and empirically understand the complex roles of digital technologies that influence contemporary cultural practices. We argue that digital platforms have reshaped the production and consumption patterns of Chinese live musical performance. Focusing on the ShowStart platform as a case study, we measured the role of the platform by collecting and analysing its performance records over a two-year period and observed the rising influence of independent small labels and small-scale performance venues in China's live music industry. Live houses, a special type of small venues that used to be niche subcultural spaces dominated by underground musicians, have become popular urban cultural consumption spaces in this platform era, expanding rapidly in large cities and expected to gradually penetrate lower-level cities. Furthermore, with the increasing commercialization of the live music market under platformization, we point out that the state's digital surveillance of the industry is also increasing, and the state's urban resource allocation for live music venues may be misplaced.

1. Introduction

In this paper, we pay special attention to digitally mediated live musical performance in the contemporary urban society of China and explore how the rapid development of digital technologies has changed its production and consumption patterns. Live musical performance is a special form of cultural object and has long existed as a traditional cultural and authentic practice, but it also has unique commercial, social, cultural and spatial values in modern society (Frith, 2007; Holt, 2010; van der Hoeven & Hitters, 2019, 2020). In contrast to a studio recording, live music allows audiences to pay directly for the music and provides them with transcendent live experiences (Behr et al., 2016). It is fluid but can be concretely captured and connected to its organizational structure as well as the participants. Thus, it is inherently spatial and provides useful insight into the relationships between cultural practices and urban social lives (Rogers, 2012, 2018; Sachs Olsen, 2018; Woods, 2020). Moreover, as a vibrant urban economic activity, live performance has attracted capital and digital technology that have deeply engaged and transformed the ways in which it is produced, organized, distributed and consumed.

Taking live music as an entry point, we examine the relationship between digital technologies and the cultural economy and present the evolving underlying power relations, social structures and spatial practices. New technologies are contributing more than traditional producer-induced mass production to consumer-based live performance in terms of value creation in scene-based music production (Lange & Bürkner, 2013). In the context of social and technological changes, the forms of live musical performance are increasingly varied and organizationally decentralized, which is leading to the reconfiguration of live music economies on a larger scale.

In particular, we seek to provide a non-Anglo-American geographical discussion of digitally mediated cultural activities that considers the elements of digital technologies and a particular Chinese environment intertwined with cultural, political and economic forces. The development of Chinese live musical performance is a unique cultural phenomenon that is deeply affected by political surveillance, ideological contestation and capital accumulation (Wang & Chen, 2019a; Zhang et al., 2022). On the one hand, the Chinese government has loosened its grip on the cultural economy since economic reforms, seeing it as a strategy to promote the economic development of cities and cultivate a vigorous cultural market under a top-down government-driven model (He & Wang, 2019; Keane, 2009; Zhang, 2006). On the other hand, the

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processes of marketization and globalization have greatly influenced the sociocultural context of contemporary Chinese popular music, bringing about increased diversity in music cultures, the awakening of self-identification, and the prospering of neoliberal cultural practices (de Kloet, 2005, 2010; Liu, 2014). These changes have broken the shackles of previous cultural politics and generated new government regulations.

In this digital era, we are witnessing the emergence of digital platforms alongside the evolving dynamic relationships between the Chinese government, market and society, reshaping the contemporary Chinese live music industry and creating new social power relations among different actors. We argue that platform mediation has played a vital role in reconfiguring the production and consumption modes of live musical performance and furthermore has involved the reproduction of urban spaces. Specifically, we select ShowStart[1], a popular Chinese online platform that specializes in live musical performance, as a case study to explore the impact of digital platforms on the live music industry. This platform is representative of a new generation of online platforms that integrates a range of technical support and services for organizing and disseminating musical performances. By upgrading digital hardware devices and software services, the platform has managed to restructure more expanded and complex social networks and promote new forms of sociocultural and spatial practices in relation to live music.

We applied various approaches to explore the functions and roles of the ShowStart platform, including the authors' personal experiences, interviews with other users, and comparative references to other musical performance platforms, in order to obtain a clear picture of how this platform is operated. Furthermore, digital platforms are key sources of data value creation (Sadowski, 2019). The ShowStart platform retains a large amount of previous performance data, which provided us with an effective channel to present the production and consumption patterns of live musical performance. In addition to the performance dataset, we consulted supplementary data sources, such as policies and regulations, government industrial reports and statistics, media reports, and relevant scholarly research materials, for a more comprehensive understanding of the Chinese live music industry. Before turning to the discussion of the features of platform mediation, we will briefly review platform studies in international and Chinese contexts, as well as the development of the music market in China, with an emphasis on cultural-political interventions in both processes.

2. The platformization of contemporary society

2.1. The penetration of digital platforms in everyday life

There has been a digital turn in geography scholarship. Many scholars over the past two decades have affirmed the necessity of an in-depth analysis of the contemporary spatiality that integrates digital technologies and have explored a series of theoretical and conceptual tools to interpret the transformational economic, social, cultural and spatial practices (e.g., Ash et al., 2018b; Crang, 2000; Graham & Marvin, 2001; Kitchin & Dodge, 2011). Focusing on cultural objects, digital technologies have reconstructed the processes of cultural production and displays of cultural objects and have changed the ways of audiencing, participating, and interacting with cultural consumption (Ash et al. (2018a); Leszczynski, 2018; Rose, 2016; Zebracki & Luger, 2019). Rose (2016) proposed three interrelated concepts to characterize digitally mediated cultural production: interface, network, and friction. She used the term "interface" to describe a form of inseparable intersection between human practices, digital hardware devices, and software systems. Additionally, according to Ash et al. (2018a), the digital interface is a composition of distinct units that communicate with users and mediate their experiences with various economic, cultural, and political services and products. The notion of "network" is articulated to connect urban spaces and various related actors. Networks are regarded as a useful tool to not only analyse relations but also describe the spatial divisions among different actors (Rose, 2016).

Specifically, the platform is a special form of digital interface that is generally defined as a highly technical framework that supports various types of applications (Guyer, 2016), including the production and consumption of cultural objects. Many fields of study have positioned the platform as a focal point, especially when dealing with digitally mediated activities related to infrastructures, markets, and cities. Platformization has become a dominant infrastructural and economic model of the web, with dynamic features of both decentralizing and recentralizing data for specific purposes (Helmond, 2015). Platform-centric digital technologies have rapidly developed and penetrated most aspects of everyday experiences in powerful ways. The platform increases the possibility of social and economic interactions and connects all parties (Davies et al., 2017). Barns (2019) emphasized the platform's infrastructural functions in everyday life. For instance, by creating a highly interactive environment, the platform can economically reduce transaction costs between platform participants and facilitate more efficient value sharing. In addition to the infrastructural nature of the digital platform, Andersson Schwarz (2017) recognized its abilities to fulfil societal functions and create economic opportunities. Similarly, the concept of "platform capitalism" was proposed to describe a new mode of economic accumulation, emphasizing the platform's functions as a sociotechnical intermediary and business arrangement in the processes of capitalization (Langley & Leyshon, 2017; Srnicek, 2017).

The virtual platform also cultivates a new spatiality of contemporary society. It participates in the transformation of urban built environments and the exchange and cooperation between regions and even promotes the development of globalization (Barns, 2019; Rose, 2016; van Dijck et al., 2018). "Platform urbanism" is another popular concept in recent platform studies that signals a theoretical understanding of the platform as a tool to coordinate networked urban actors and spaces through the interface and the algorithm (Leszczynski, 2020; McLaren & Agyeman, 2015). Cities are places where resources, capital, and local markets are relatively concentrated and thus are the most important application scenarios for platform mediation. With the functioning of digital platforms, urban services become more flexible and market-oriented, which further reshapes urban spaces and produces new urban values (Barns, 2019; Sadowski, 2020).

Noting the inseparable interaction between the digital platform and the composition of social structures, Van Dijck et al. (2018: 2) proposed the term "platform society", referring to the platform as "the heart of societies—affecting institutions, economic transactions, and social and cultural practices". This stream of platform research has shifted the focus to evolving social structures in relation to platform-mediated practices, in addition to economic activities, and paid increasing attention to new societal and spatial arrangements provided by and interacting with the Internet and digital technologies. This suggests that the platform not only makes the wider public more closely interconnected but also directly participates in the creation and distribution of public interests. In this regard, the definition of "platform society" indicates that the platform has become an essential part of society.

2.2. The practice of digital platforms in China

Given the increasingly significant influence of digital platforms in everyday life, a burgeoning amount of research in recent years (e.g., Nooren et al., 2018; Popiel & Sang, 2021) has debated the regulation of digital platforms (including giants such as Facebook, YouTube and Amazon and increasingly platforms that provide daily life services, such as Airbnb, Uber and Deliveroo) in order to prevent excessive capital control and safeguard public interests. Wood (2017), among other scholars, presented the global turn to authoritarianism in multiple forms in the contexts of globalization and neoliberalism, such as the new form

[1] Official website: https://www.showstart.com/.

of platform authoritarianism. Although concerns about this new authoritarianism have focused mainly on the excessive power of some giant platforms, state governments in some countries are using digital technologies to expand the scope of regulation. For example, in Singapore, the authorities have extended surveillance and censorship through and into cyberspace, producing a new authoritarian government framework linked with digital platforms (Luger, 2015, 2020). In China, due to intrusive state regulation and intervention, a set of emerging problems and contestations, often distinct from those of other countries, have been produced through the complex and diverse forms of the platform ecosystem (de Kloet et al., 2019).

Digital restrictions imposed by the Chinese government date back to the early years of China's Internet development, especially after the completion of the fully functional Great Firewall in the 2000s. The Great Firewall forms an authoritarian network enclosure (de Seta, 2021a) that is used to block and drive out noncompliant or unwanted users, thus safeguarding national network information security and facilitating the development of cyber sovereignty. In this context, many international players are distrusted and blocked from China, which has allowed local Chinese Internet companies to experiment and develop in the large domestic market, incubating the rise of large Chinese digital platforms over the following decade. Underlying this is also the government's intention to implement techno-nationalist policies to enhance global competitiveness and promote the digital economy (de Seta, 2021a).

Plantin and de Seta (2019) framed a Chinese model of platform infrastructuralization through the case of WeChat, one of the most influential Chinese mega-platforms, and identified three features of this model. The first is platform protectionism, as the state and platform companies may work together to establish commercial and security thresholds to prevent international competition. The second is governmental control. To be able to operate properly in China, platforms often compromise with the government and enforce strict user surveillance guidelines. The third is nationalization. Chinese platforms tend to actively collaborate with state authorities to develop public services and even allow the state to digitally monitor people's daily lives. In the process, official narratives have penetrated online discussions on major Chinese media platforms, which are subjected to strict censorship (King et al., 2013; Zhang, 2020a).

Not all Chinese platforms are as large and feature-rich as WeChat, but this model hints at some important characteristics of Chinese platforms, as private platforms can always be placed under close government surveillance if the government wants to monitor them. According to the Internet Group Information Service Management Provisions released by the Cyberspace Administration of China in 2017[2], the government can request cooperation from the platform to obtain its data at any time. Under such strongly censored Internet circumstances, platforms need to maintain a good relationship with the authorities and policy-makers to obtain benefits and business opportunities (Plantin & de Seta, 2019).

Studies on Chinese social media platforms and increasingly on cultural and entertainment platforms have also examined the relationship among platforms, the market and the state, mostly confirming the platform governance logic mentioned above. These recent discussions have focused mainly on three themes: first, the negotiation of platform practices under state regulation and surveillance, which, for instance, shape a video streaming platform's microlevel operation (W. Wang & Lobato, 2019); second, the platform's interaction with people in their daily lives in the peculiar Chinese political-economic context, such as scenes of dating (Chan, 2020), short video sharing (Lin & de Kloet, 2019) and deepfakes (de Seta, 2021b); and third, new forms of digital censorship developed by the Chinese government to regulate citizens through platforms, such as using licence and copyright rules to govern grassroots creativity (J. Wang & Yu, 2021). Beyond these debates, there are possibilities of using China's platform practices to further explore the multiple interactive relationships among platforms, societies and urban spaces. For example, Morris (2021, 2022a,b) identified new types of digital practices affecting urban spatiality, as people can use WeChat and Weibo as tools to resist the state's spatial governance.

The first part of Section 2 presented the multidimensional theoretical establishment of recent platform studies, but they are based mostly on Western cases. As the rapid development process of platformization occurs in the largest market in the world, China's empirical experiences can contribute to expanding the existing theories of digital platforms. We need a better understanding of how platforms generate new technologies and digital practices to challenge traditional business models, societal systems and cultural mores. As de Seta (2021b: 948) argued, "historicizing, contextualizing, and disaggregating" the trajectories of specific platforms are important steps for more in-depth platform studies.

3. The cultural politics of the music industry in China

3.1. State-supported marketization of the music industry

There has been a gradual shift from state-led to market-led in social power relations in the Chinese music industry over the past four decades (Fung, 2007, 2016). Additionally, global capital and music genres have deeply influenced the development of the Chinese music culture and society. In socialist China, the government dominated music production and banned all imported music, and music and musical performance served primarily as tools for cultural propaganda. After 1978, the state reorganized its production units in shifting from a planned to a market economy. With the opening-up policy, the global music industry reentered China, and popular music content, especially from Hong Kong and Taiwan, was imported and quickly spread through Chinese mass media, profoundly affecting local music making (Fung, 2007). These operations could be seen as experimental under the Chinese authoritarian regime with the goal of minimizing ideological conflict with the authorities (Fung, 2016). Since the late 1980s, different music actors have contested and negotiated state ideological control, and there has been a growing trend of state-supported marketization of the music industry.

Music and musical performance, as part of the creative and cultural industries, are increasingly being seen as important strategies to promote urban development and redevelopment worldwide (Baird & Scott, 2018; Hudson, 2006). Kong et al. (2006) argued that in China, the official promotion of the creative and cultural industries, starting in the 1990s and greatly enhanced since the early 2000s, is a combination of commercial interpretation of creativity and traditional socialist development goals. Fung (2016) presented two dimensions of the creative industries in China. The first is global reliance, as China relies on global advanced experience, cultural policies, capital investment and management skills for the development of its own commercialized cultural industries. The second is ideological control over cultural content, such as through propaganda, indoctrination and education. As legacies of state socialism, public cultural institutions (*shiye danwei*) that are noncommericalizable continue to use music and other cultural products as propaganda tools (Wang, 2004; Zhang, 2006). Although artistic freedom has been granted to private parties, the government strictly retains control over publication, exhibition and circulation (Zhang, 2014). These dimensions are often interrelated and allow the Chinese government to implement top-down cultural policies for nation branding both domestically and internationally.

Moreover, boundaries between public and private, commerce and culture have been gradually blurred as new regulations and more integrated business models have emerged, and the state can utilize non-state actors to achieve its goals. After China entered the WTO, the state-global relationship expanded rapidly. However, while private and foreign capitals are allowed to enter the cultural industries, they can invest only

[2] See in Chinese: https://www.cac.gov.cn/2017–09/07/c_1121623889.htm (Accessed on January 11th, 2023).

in those cultural products deemed less sensitive to national culture and information security (Kong et al., 2006). To protect domestic cultural industries from foreign competition, the state has also imposed strict regulation on foreign investment and intentionally inflicted a low level of copyright enforcement, causing global investment to stagnate (Montgomery, 2009). Such political intervention has prevented China from developing a normal music market and caused rampant piracy.

Censorship is a major manifestation of state cultural control. Music censorship dates back to socialist China and has been continuously applied since the opening-up; these restrictions are placed on lyrics, album releases, and organizing concerts and cause exclusion from television and other major media (Amar, 2020; Baranovitch, 2003). Private parties and musical genres such as rock, punk, hip-hop and metal have particularly been confronted with music censorship, as they are considered highly sensitive and in conflict with the official voice. Constant restrictions have led many musicians to go underground and fostered an influential urban subculture, which is further explained in the next section. In 2018, the newly established National Radio and Television Administration, which was formerly under the supervision of the central government, was reorganized under the direct supervision of the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. It directly took over propaganda tools, including regulation of media, publication authorization, and distribution of cultural work. This reflects the closer control of the cultural and music field in recent years since Xi Jinping took office (Amar, 2020).

Another notable point is the digital turn in China's music industry, which has not only triggered the rapid development of digital music production and consumption but also spawned new digital regulations for the music industry (Qu et al., 2021). For more than a decade, the value chain of the recorded music industry was affected by the increase in digital technologies. China quickly followed this global trend and became a leading country in digital music consumption, especially since the popularization of the mobile Internet after 2010 (Tang & Lyons, 2016). After 2015, with the new agreement on digital copyrights, the digital music industry developed a new business model. Chinese tech giants, including the BAT (Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent) and NetEase, established their "all-rounded industrial value chain" (Chen, 2021), which is in fact a platform ecosystem bringing producers, disseminators and consumers together in one marketplace. These giant music platforms began to compete to expand by incorporating self-releasing independent musicians, who used to be outside the business model of the traditional record industry (Qu et al., 2021). Moreover, they developed mega-apps that increasingly incorporated social media functions, and music is considered an added-valued service (see also Liu & Yang, 2017). Digital social media have also reconfigured the popular music industry and created new popular music idol industries (Zhang & Negus, 2020). This indicates a shift in the music industry from the traditional supply chain-based recording era to more integrated platform-based circuits in the new era, which has also made it convenient for the government to exert new influence on the industry.

3.2. *China's live performance industry: The dynamics between the mainstream and underground*

As mentioned above, the propaganda-oriented cultural production mechanisms, institutions and contents inherited from the state socialist period were disrupted after the 1980s by market reforms, privatization and globalization, profoundly changing the landscape of the musical performance market. Two main segments have formed in the long run (Zhang et al., 2022): the first consists of sponsored performances, the majority of which are performed by public cultural institutions and funded by different levels of the Chinese government as nonprofit projects; the second segment is commercial performances, with the main goal of making a profit. The development of commercial music performance can be seen as a representative cultural experiment after the reopening of the cultural market, as market forces attempted various approaches to commercial activities in a grey zone and triggered the state to redefine the boundaries of the performance market through the formulation of cultural policies.

Since the early 1980s, artists from Hong Kong and Taiwan have frequently appeared at officially sanctioned gala events organized by central or local television stations (Baranovitch, 2003; Liu et al., 2015). Especially after the 1990s, with the deepening of the market economy, popular musical performances strongly influenced by Hong Kong and Taiwan, and later Western and East Asian countries, became one of the most popular performance forms and remain so, attracting large audiences and constituting the mainstream of the commercial live performance market.

After the mid-1980s, a few influential performances from private parties also appeared. These people were among the first private entrepreneurs in the process of privatization, leading to the emergence of a type of unofficial performance activity called "*zouxue*", which means they actively or passively stepped out of their *danwei* (work unit) to earn extra money and were free to choose where and how to perform (Baranovitch, 2003; Wang, 2005). This included musicians represented by Cui Jian, who pioneered Chinese rock music and influenced the cultural memory of a generation.

However, rock performances were considered contrary to the official will. Since the early 1990s, the government has issued performance licences to musicians and venues (Wang, 2005). After 1993, rock performers were subject to many official restrictions, such as being excluded from traditional mass media and being unable to organize large-scale performances (de Kloet, 2005). As a result, many rock and alternative performances went underground to escape regulation. They were usually found in informal small venues, such as bars, restaurants and hotels, where performance licensing was not strictly supervised or enforced and other business activities such as catering were used to disguise performance activities (Wang & Chen, 2019a). These underground rock performances were especially prevalent in areas where young college students and foreigners congregated and formed an urban subculture of marginal and alternative symbols and identities (Jian, 2017). Another major performance type was the rock festival, often hosted in ethnic-minority areas in the western hinterlands and the commercial south that are far from Beijing and have relatively lax control (Wang & Chen, 2019a).

On the other side, the mechanism for the marketization of China's music industry has gradually improved, including the introduction of copyright law, the contract system and the agent system in the 1990s. In particular, the relaxation of government control over music publishing in 1997 allowed the emergence of local independent record companies as well as an increased number of independent bands producing recordings (de Kloet, 2005). After the 2000s, the mass consumption of musical performance began, and nonpublic economic entities were allowed more ample room for development. In 2005, the State Council announced for the first time that nonpublic capital was allowed to enter the cultural industry and was encouraged to participate in the corporate reform of state-owned cultural institutions in the form of investment, equity participation, holding, mergers and acquisitions; in 2008, the entry of nonpublic capital was extended to most types of performing arts institutions, including performance venues, performance groups and agencies[3].

The commercialization of musical performance was accompanied by

[3] There are three milestone policy documents in the process of market-oriented transformation of the performing arts market: the State Council's "Several Decisions on the Entry of Non-public Capital into the Cultural Industry" (April 2005); the revised "Regulations on the Administration of Business Performance" (September 2005); and the "Opinions on Building a Reasonable Performance Market Supply System and Promoting the Prosperous Development of the Performance Market" by the National Development and Reform Commission (January 2008).

a recession of the strong ideological element of music content and a shift in government attitudes. For example, local governments have begun to use rock music festivals as a means of city branding and revenue generation (J. Wang & Chen, 2019a). Since the early 2000s, state and nonstate actors have often jointly organized music festivals. This cultural economy phenomenon continues to the present day, reflecting the positive attitude of local governments towards welcoming low-cost but high-impact events, especially in certain small and remote cities.

Another important phenomenon that has emerged since the mid-2000s is the popularity of live houses, which represents the upgrade of infrastructures of the live music industry and is an important signal of the development of independent music in China (Liu & Cai, 2014; Wang & Chen, 2019a, 2019b). The live house model originated in Japan and then spread to large cities in China and East Asia (Wang & Chen, 2019a). These small-scale live music spaces usually have small audiences (approximately several hundred) but are equipped with more professional and high-quality performance equipment than bars or clubs. Jian (2017) argued that the first decade of the development of live houses in China (approximately 2005–2015) represents a pre-commercial period of China's independent musical performance and a continuation of underground music performance. These live houses did not pursue profitability and stood out because of their unique atmosphere and taste in music. They also played an important role in supporting and cultivating many independent musicians, who preferred to stay underground in these small venues and circulate their work within a limited scope of audience to avoid government censorship or the compromise associated with large music companies (Jian, 2018; Nie, 2021).

In the last decade or so, more capital has entered, accelerating the commercialization and industrialization of China's live music scene and bringing more musicians and the niche subculture associated with live house performance into the spotlight from the underground, especially the Rap of China (*zhongguo you xiha*) in 2017 and the Big Band (*yuedui de xiatian*) in 2019. On the one hand, this has brought more consumers and investment to the live music industry. New live houses that can accommodate larger audiences have appeared one after another, with more professional equipment and a greater emphasis on commercial profitability. On the other hand, it has also brought about an escalation of government control. Luo and Ming (2020) identified much stronger regulation of hip-hop culture and a crackdown on rappers after the popularity of the Rap of China and argued that commercialization and forced incorporation with the state have become new forms of censorship. In addition, the government has become increasingly strict about the legalization and institutionalization of small music venues (Jian, 2017). This dynamic control of informal space is considered a new technique of governance, as when informal behaviours breach government interests and the need for stability, the government expels the associated people and behaviours by declaring the space illegal (Morris, 2022b). As a result, live houses are becoming increasingly orderly and commercialized.

Over decades, government control over the live music market has undergone repeated tightening and loosening, creating the dynamic between the mainstream and underground. Informal underground performances since the 1990s have usually been left out of official statistics. However, with the increasing commercialization after 2008 and the formalization of small venues, they have been accepted as more mainstream commercial and even official events. Fig. 1 illustrates the nationwide statistics of live performance revenues over a twenty-year period. It suggests the significantly increasing role of nonstate sectors, which have grown to represent the majority of performance practitioners. However, the boundary between state and nonstate is not absolute. While the role of Chinese government in organizing live performances has been diminishing, new regulatory measures and approved investment methods have been developed to penetrate and influence the commercial live performance practices of nonstate actors.

4. Digital platforms and China's live music practices: The case of ShowStart

Along with the boom in China's live music market, digital platforms targeting live performances have also experienced rapid development. In a statement released in 2015, the Chinese government noted the importance of promoting the integration of Internet innovations with the music industry and actively encouraged the construction of musical performance service platforms (National Press and Publication Administration, 2015). However, previous studies have rarely addressed the issue of the transformation of the live music industry driven by digital platforms (Zhang & Negus, 2021). In the following, this paper focuses on the ShowStart platform and analyses how its operation has affected the patterns of the Chinese live music market. In recent years, ShowStart has become one of the most influential digital platforms in China in the field of live musical performance[4], especially featuring independent music.

Its background information indicates that ShowStart is a subsidiary of Taihe Music Group, which is one of the largest music groups and music service providers in mainland China. The music industry is important in China's Internet economy, with almost all major Internet giants deeply involved in it. The largest shareholder in Taihe Music is Baidu, one of the BAT, and it has also developed a close relationship with another Internet giant, Alibaba. In the current Chinese music industry, Tencent owns the largest music streaming platforms that occupy most of the online music market, while Taihe Music focuses more on the music production side, with significant resources of musicians and music labels. Around 2015, Taihe established the ShowStart platform in an effort to develop the live music industry, relying on its existing musician resources in particular to build independent music brands and open up the independent music market. As a representative platform developed in response to market-oriented demand and driven by new Internet technologies, ShowStart provides a new perspective from which to examine the current patterns of the production and consumption of live musical performance as well as the changing underlying social power relations.

In the early stages of the Internet in China, there were two main types of platform-based technologies related to musical performances. The first was online ticketing platforms, which mainly targeted large commercial live performances and were initially used as a complementary channel to offline ticketing. They emerged in the early 2000s with the rise of online payment functions and gradually replaced offline windows as the primary ticketing channel in the early 2010s, according to Analysys (2019), accompanying the popularization of mobile Internet services. Ticketing websites and mobile apps have a relatively low technical threshold and quickly blossomed all over the country. After 2015, some large-scale and well-resourced platforms, such as Damai and Yongle, gradually occupied the national market of commercial performances and extended their business scope to a broader entertainment ecosystem to incorporate more music resources, which led to the decline of small-scale ticketing platforms (Analysys, 2019; Zhang, 2020b).

The second type of technology was the social network platform that emerged in the Web 2.0 era, represented by Douban, which has a highly popular community of arts and culture lovers and targets more small-scale performances. Unlike large-scale concerts or music festivals, which often have a unified ticketing channel, small-scale performances (e.g., those in pubs and live houses, often underground) initially lacked the support of a professional ticketing system (including the first type of ticketing platform) and relied heavily on on-site ticket purchases. Information on independent musicians and small performances was usually disorganized and not disseminated to consumers in a timely manner (Zhang, 2020b). Thus, Douban established a city-based information

[4] According to the *Annual Comprehensive Analysis of China's Live Performance Ticketing Market in 2018* by Analysys (in Chinese, https://www.analysys.cn/article/analysis/detail/20019227), ShowStart ranked second in terms of user size.

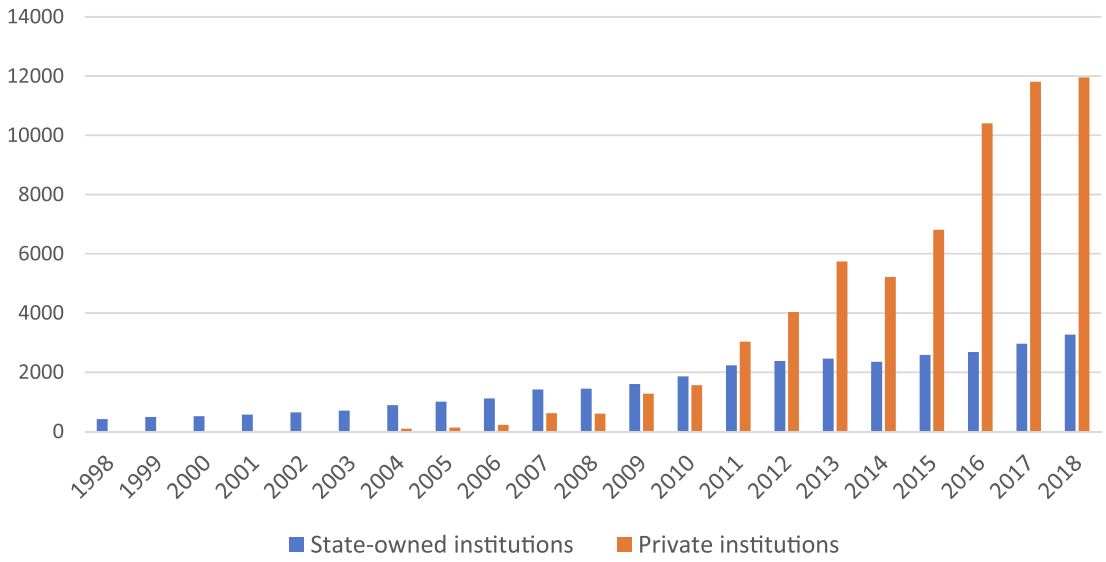

Fig. 1. Live performance revenues of state-owned institutions and private institutions in China (RMB millions) (Source: *Statistical Yearbook of Chinese Cultural Relics and Culture*, Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China).

release platform (Douban Tongcheng) that targets small-scale cultural activities. This platform is highly flexible, allowing event organizers to freely publish performance information. The platform has had positive effects, as, according to Chin et al. (2013), if an event has a high level of attention and discussion on Douban, it will increase the popularity of the event as well as the actual number of participants. It is worth mentioning that the Douban platform is a less commercial site (Qu et al., 2021), and usually has no direct interest relationship with event organizers. Although an increasing number of social platforms, including Douban, have also developed ticketing services, they are not as competitive in the market as the first type of professional ticketing platform.

In contrast to the above two platform models, the ShowStart platform has positioned itself as a centralized infrastructure that represents a new business model for independent music performance. Starting with the commission profit of ticketing services, it has attempted to take the initiative to create more performance opportunities to obtain greater profits. In this sense, ShowStart is a strategic expansion of the parent company, Taihe Music Group, in the field of live music in the music industry chain. Therefore, Taihe has brought substantial music resources to the ShowStart platform, such as music labels and musicians, which are the core resources required for performance events. As mentioned earlier, many independent musicians and small venues in China have long been operating underground. The ShowStart platform attempts to integrate all performance resources, especially independent musicians, labels and small venues. The platform actively connects a large group of performance-related actors, including (a) promoters/labels, (b) musicians/bands, (c) performance venues, and (d) audiences, allowing them to freely enter the platform and transparently display their personal information there so that they can be easily reached by other parties. However, to access the platform, all promoters and venues must provide an official business licence allowing commercial live performance, and for individual musicians and bands, their personal identification is required. This means that informal underground performances are not allowed on ShowStart.

For promoters, the performance organization process is simplified by using the ShowStart platform, as they can directly post performance information there. Through ShowStart's online ticketing system, promoters can quickly determine their box-office revenues, and the money from audiences can be credited directly to promoters' accounts. In addition, according to the ShowStart website, the platform provides technical assistance, close interaction with music fans, marketing, and brand management and allows music-related products to be sold via the platform's online shop system. In these different scenarios, communication and interaction between producers and consumers are more efficient.

For musicians, ShowStart has launched programs to financially support the growth and development of selected independent musicians and has developed a crowdfunding function to allow musicians to raise money from their fans. Moreover, musicians can access industry resources from ShowStart's parent company, Taihe Music Group, and are provided with multifaceted services and opportunities such as the production and release of albums, copyright transactions, the organization of live performances and offline events, promotion, ticket sales, music peripherals, and other customized services[5]. By doing so, the platform lowers the barrier to entry into the live music market for independent musicians; therefore, it is apparent that ShowStart's ambition is to take over the roles of traditional music labels in nurturing, supporting, and hosting live musical performances for grassroots musicians with high potential and eventually profiting from them.

For venues, the ShowStart platform presents detailed information about individual venues, which can enhance their visibility. Since this information is publicly available, not only the audience but also potential third-party promoters and musicians who need to find a venue to play can search for venues on the platform. In fact, ShowStart actively develops close business relationships with performance venues, especially with live houses. As of 2021, it had established long-term strategic partnerships with more than 800 live houses across the country (Zhu, 2021). Moreover, ShowStart directly invests in performance programs and regular tours, thus offering more performance opportunities to its partner venues to help them develop (Zhu, 2021). In this sense, ShowStart realizes scaled operations by connecting venues and performance resources, and in this mode, venues are actually the urban infrastructure of the platform extended to various cities. This indicates that it is increasingly necessary for venues to be attached to the platform; otherwise, they may gradually become marginalized or even eliminated. Compared to the musicians and labels that can produce performance resources, venues are more often in the position of being selected and

[5] The Showstart official website explains a number of services provided to musicians and bands, such as releasing music or albums and organizing live tours for musicians. For instance, the entrance of Showstart Release: https://release.showstart.com/; live tour planning: https://www.showstart.com/musicplan.

can easily be replaced by other venues of the same type.

For audiences, ShowStart has developed an interactive mobile application for its users. The application displays on its homepage the performance information of the user's city and the nearest venues, allowing users to monitor the platform for the latest performance information. With its social media function, users can also communicate directly with other users. According to the authors' own user experience, audiences can use the platform to establish private connections during or after an event and gradually form circles of daily contact to attend performances together at local live venues.

According to ShowStart's officially released data, it has a share of more than 90 % of the Chinese live house performance market[6] and has become the largest portal for independent music in the mobile era. The performance resources it obtains, such as musicians, labels, and venues, are recentralized and can, in turn, feed back into the development of its parent company, Taihe. Therefore, it has also become a typical case of China's platform capitalism in this particular field.

5. Data collection and analysis

Building on the interpretation of the operating model of ShowStart, we proceeded to investigate, through the music performance data collected from this platform, the various impacts of the platform on the practices of live musical performance. We collected a total of two years of offline live performance records from July 2017 to June 2019 from the ShowStart website. This two-year performance database reveals new features of the production and consumption of live music under ShowStart.

The database records the detailed information of each performance, most of which contains the premises of the promoters of the performance and the specific address of the venue that they chose for the performance. In total, 4,156 performances were recorded in the two-year time period. After the process of data cleansing, we eventually collected 2,221 valid records of live musical performances containing the above information, through which we obtained lists of 342 promoters and 368 venues for further analysis. Each promoter holds a business licence, so we used an enterprise search platform to determine the city where each promoter was based as well as their specific business addresses.

To better understand the business behaviours of different types of promoters, we divided them into three groups according to their company attributes: (a) state-owned enterprises or public institutions (that are endorsed by the government), (b) major labels, and (c) independent small labels; this division also reflects the funding sources of different musical performances. It is easy to identify members of group (a) by the source of capital behind them. For the latter two groups, we classify large companies that have the power to influence the entire industry chain of the music industry as major labels, most of which are traditional mainstream record labels in China and abroad; another major distinguishing mark is the registered capital, which is very high for major labels (or their parent companies), all exceeding 10 million yuan and sometimes far beyond this figure. In contrast, most independent small labels have small amounts of registered capital and mostly have individual investors. All performance venues were classified into four categories: live house, theatre, stadium, and outdoor. We found that these four categories differ in many respects, including average distance from the city centre, overall number of performances, and the origin of the performance promoters; some of these details will be further discussed later.

[6] These data are announced on ShowStart's official website and are also mentioned in Zhu (2021).

5.1. Platform marketization: The rise of emerging non-mainstream musical performance resources

Table 1 classifies all the collected valid performance records according to the attributes of the promoter and the type of venue, which reflect two basic characteristics of live musical performances on the ShowStart platform. First, in line with its platform product positioning, the majority of the performances recorded on this platform took place in small and medium-sized indoor venues. Among them, live house performances account for 68.8 %, and the scale of such performances is generally small, with only a few hundred attendees. Second, most performances on the platform were organized by independent small labels, followed by major labels, with the fewest organized by state-owned institutions. Major labels and state-owned institutions are traditional mainstream performance resources, while ShowStart, as an emerging digital platform, showcases the decentralized feature of mobilizing emerging non-mainstream and small-scale performance resources. This changes the original performance market pattern and makes live houses and small labels, previously in a weak position of power, important participants in the market.

Additionally, we found that there is a closer connection between live house performances and independent small labels than other categories. Among all performances organized by independent labels, the percentage of live house performances is 76.8 %, which is higher than the total percentage of live house performances (68.8 %) among all performances and much higher than the percentages of those organized by major labels (56.6 %) and state-owned institutions (only 15.2 %). In contrast, major labels and state-owned organizations have a higher proportion of theatre and stadium performances, which are often larger in scale and require more funds, technology and resources. These types of performances are also representative of traditional mainstream performances.

Four maps are presented in Fig. 2 to indicate the nationwide distribution of live houses, theatres, stadiums and outdoor venues, with indications of the number of performances in each venue as well as the attributes of the promoters. The figure shows the overall spatial and social relationships among various live performance participants on the ShowStart platform. Different types of promoters have significantly different preferences in their choices of host cities and venues for performances. First, nonstate sectors had a very active presence and produced most of the live house performances recorded on the platform, and the performances organized by independent labels accounted for the majority in cities at all levels across the country. Second, major labels accounted for the largest proportion of theatre and stadium performances, but there were regional differences. In the eastern coastal areas with Shanghai as the core, it was more common for independent small labels to organize theatre performances, while in other regions, especially in the west and north, major labels were dominant. Third, outdoor performances show greater differences in geographical distribution and sources of promoters than the other three types of performance. Promoters from the state sector supplied a relatively small number of musical performances to the platform; however, outdoor performances were the most active type of performance organized by them. Additionally, such outdoor performances, especially those organized by state-owned institutions, were geographically dispersed and often took place in small and medium-sized cities.

Furthermore, we want to highlight the differences in the live music market between large cities and lower-tier cities, which is reflected by the distribution of performance venues and the themes of the performances in different places. The database reveals that most performances in smaller cities tended to be in outdoor venues, such as parks and tourist areas; in contrast, live performances in large cities were held mostly in smaller indoor venues that provide a high-quality audio experience (Fig. 2). The stages of outdoor venues are often temporarily constructed; thus, the quality of performance equipment in these venues cannot be guaranteed. Additionally, outdoor performances in small cities often involve a hotchpotch of musicians or bands with different styles in a

Table 1
Classification of performance records.

	Performance organized by							
	Independent label		Major label		State-owned institution		Total	
Venue	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Live house	1135	76.8 %	383	56.6 %	10	15.2 %	1528	68.8 %
Theatre	212	14.3 %	221	32.6 %	24	36.4 %	457	20.6 %
Stadium	38	2.6 %	52	7.7 %	5	7.6 %	95	4.3 %
Outdoor	93	6.3 %	21	3.1 %	27	40.9 %	141	6.3 %
All performances	1478	100.0 %	677	100.0 %	66	100.0 %	2221	100.0 %

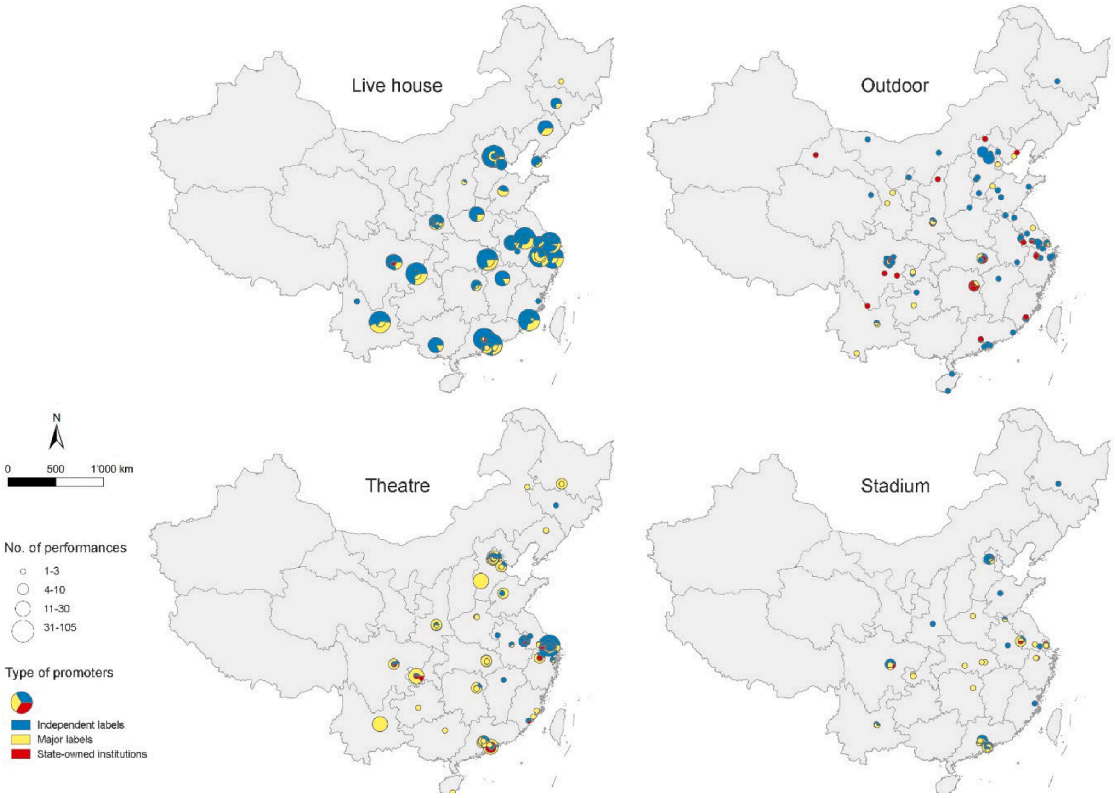

Fig. 2. The distribution and features of the four types of performance venues in China.

single performance (*pinpan yanchu*). Such performances are similar to gala events or music festivals, and often do not have a clear theme. Unlike in large cities, promoters of performance tours by a single musician or band seldom choose smaller music markets, fearing that the revenue will not even cover the costs. These differences from large cities indicate that the development of the live music market in lower-level cities is still in its infancy. While the market in large cities has become more diversified and high-end, the market in lower-tier cities still retains traces of government dominance from the past.

5.2. Live houses: Rapidly expanding urban cultural consumption spaces in major cities and beyond

The above explains the varying tendencies of different types of promoters and performance formats in their selection of urban spaces, city levels, and regions. To better illustrate the relationships between performance promoters and the consumer market in major Chinese cities, we created a scatterplot (Fig. 3) to display the numbers of live performances based on the city's role as a "source city", where the promoter of the performance is located, or a "host city", where the performance takes place. Specifically, Beijing and Shanghai are undoubtedly in the first tier. Shenzhen, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Wuhan, Guangzhou, and Chengdu, among others, are in the second tier. All these cities are China's first- and second-tier cities, as labelled by the Chinese government, that have important political and economic status. Clearly, there are obvious urban hierarchies among these cities, suggesting a strong scale effect on the live music industry.

Moreover, source cities, where promoters are based, are much more limited than host cities of live performances, and promoter sources are concentrated in a handful of major cities. This illustrates a high degree of agglomeration of promoters in large cities, which is consistent with the findings of other studies (e.g., Hracs, 2015; Watson, 2008) that music production relies heavily on professional technologies and skilled musicians who are usually agglomerated, regardless of whether they are independent or affiliated with major labels or state-owned institutions. We use these results to show that under the new platform-based musical performance business model, music labels and musicians are still the core elements of the competitiveness of the live music industry, which are relatively concentrated, while the consumer market of new types of musical performance may spread out more easily.

Table 2 shows the top 15 cities in number of performances to further evaluate the status of emerging platform-mediated musical performance resources in major Chinese cities. The proportion of live house performances and the proportion of performances organized by independent

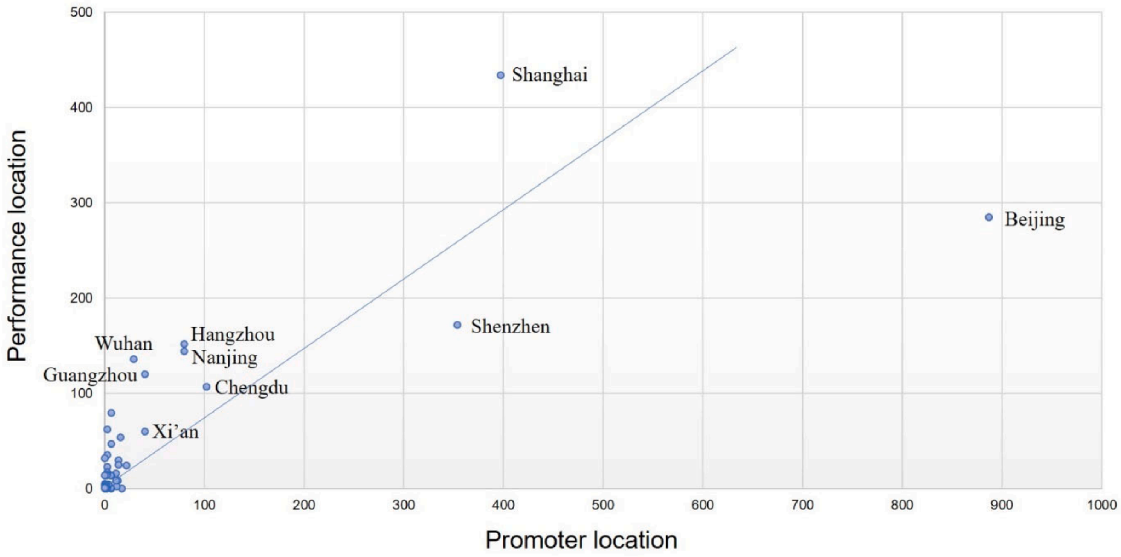

Fig. 3. Scatterplot of numbers of live performances in major Chinese cities based on promoter location and performance location.

Table 2
Top 15 cities in number of performances.

City	Total number of performances	Percentage of live house performances	Percentage of performances organized by independent labels
Shanghai	434	67.97 %	76.96 %
Beijing	285	68.77 %	71.23 %
Shenzhen	172	74.42 %	65.70 %
Hangzhou	152	85.53 %	63.82 %
Nanjing	144	77.08 %	70.14 %
Wuhan	136	77.94 %	60.29 %
Guangzhou	120	73.33 %	67.50 %
Chengdu	107	65.42 %	57.01 %
Chongqing	79	67.09 %	54.43 %
Kunming	62	67.74 %	45.16 %
Xi'an	60	65.00 %	61.67 %
Ningbo	54	85.19 %	77.78 %
Xiamen	47	87.23 %	74.47 %
Suzhou	35	82.86 %	71.43 %
Hefei	32	81.25 %	84.38 %

small labels in each city show obvious regional differences. Live house performances account for a particularly high proportion in the eastern region, especially in a few second-tier eastern coastal cities (e.g., Hangzhou, Ningbo, Xiamen, and Suzhou), and a relatively low proportion in some western provincial capitals (e.g., Chengdu, Chongqing, Kunming, and Xi'an). In terms of the performances organized by independent small labels, their proportions again are relatively low in the aforementioned western provincial capitals. This indicates that the eastern coastal regions, where the economic level and cultural market are relatively more prosperous, are more vibrant in terms of emerging performance resources and institutions.

Based on the data disclosed by ShowStart, its box office revenue has more than doubled annually since its inception, and live house performance is one of the fastest-growing categories (Zhu, 2021). The two-year performance records that we collected confirm the rapid growth of live house performances. Spatially, the early live house performances on the platform were basically limited to a few first-tier cities and second-tier provincial capitals, but later live house performances not only grew significantly in number but also spread rapidly to many other second- and third-tier cities, showing an obvious trend of consumer market diffusion. Based on the above analysis and the fact that live houses are often closely linked with independent musical performances and small labels, we think that live houses not only are becoming rapidly expanding cultural consumption spaces in China's first- and second-tier cities but also are expected to gradually penetrate many lower-level cities in the future.

6. Discussion and conclusion: Increasing commercialization but also increasing surveillance

This paper shows that the digital platform has emerged as a "focal point" (Barns, 2019), unveiling the new features of the live music industry in contemporary Chinese urban society. Focusing on the case of the ShowStart platform, it demonstrates that platform mediation can play a significant role in reconfiguring the practices and processes of live musical performance. The platform has altered the production and consumption patterns of the live music industry, offering a portal to closely interconnect different actors and spaces. We measured the role of the platform through a two-year performance database collected from ShowStart and found that it has successfully increased the business value of independent music and venues by creating a new business model based on a platform ecosystem. The most important findings from the empirical data are that long-underground and marginalized independent musicians and labels have become increasingly active in the platform-mediated live music market; correspondingly, the platform has driven live houses, which were previously niche subculture spaces, to become rapidly expanding urban cultural consumption spaces.

At the same time, however, the regulatory requirements for these private groups and niche spaces have become more stringent. The official document "Performance Ticketing Service and Technical Specification", issued in August 2021, put forwards the government requirements for strengthening the regulation of performance service platforms with an online ticketing system (Han, 2021). It requires all ticketing systems to be connected to the official performance ticketing information collection and service platform, which was built by the China Performance Industry Association with the support of the government. This provides an effective channel for digitally monitoring and managing live performances. It reflects the government's increasing interest in the digital regulation of performance platforms. ShowStart, among other major platforms, responded quickly to accept this requirement (Han, 2021). At present, a full real-name system for ticket purchases has been implemented on the mobile app of ShowStart, and ID card authentication is required. In the COVID-19 situation, ShowStart further developed a ticket gate system to strictly verify the identity of each audience member (Zhu, 2021). This has allowed the government to

acquire all audience information for each performance.

Thus, we further argue that the commercialization of the independent music performance market under the platform also means its formalization. This formalization is a path from underground to aboveground for independent musicians and labels in order to survive in the commercial present. As mentioned above, the Chinese government stipulates that all commercial live performances must be reported to the local cultural authorities for approval (Amar, 2020). However, previously, independent music performances in pubs and live houses, due to their relatively small scale, often successfully avoided government regulation and stayed underground. Many musicians voluntarily refused to participate in large-scale performances to avoid censorship and preferred to stay underground. Now that these independent musicians, labels and live houses all have to use the platform mode and the industry has become more commercialized and platform-oriented, their live performances can no longer bypass official censorship and are more easily monitored through the platform. Therefore, they face a situation where they have nowhere to hide, which also threatens their independent identities as well as their music products. When independent music becomes a business, it loses its original personality and sharpness of expression (Jian, 2017). For this representative of cultural industries to which the government has always been highly sensitive, the platform seems to have allowed the government a new approach to effective regulation and governance. That is, the platform has become a new form of music censorship.

Another issue is related to live venues. We argue that Chinese city governments still lack complete knowledge of the emerging small performance spaces represented by live houses. As reflected in the transformation of urban space, we note the rise of new cultural consumption spaces in large cities. Live houses have emerged as an important ground for the development of independent music performance. Specifically, there are two main models of cultural infrastructure construction in terms of musical performance venues. The first is the construction of small venues, mainly by the private sector, with the goal of enhancing the profitability of musical performances by adopting a market-driven development model from the bottom up; such a trend starts in large cities and gradually spreads to lower-tier cities around them. The other is a government-led model that uses cultural facilities as value-added weight to attract investment and increase land values: large-scale performance venues as megaprojects are constructed to be urban cultural landmarks for city branding. This is a top-down development model, but such development-oriented investment may potentially cause a mismatch of urban resources since it is difficult for large-scale venues to maintain a high utilization rate.

Based on the findings related to the current platform-based live music industry, this paper challenges the existing government initiatives on promoting the live music industry and constructing urban cultural spaces, which definitely require reconsideration in order to accommodate the new era's cultural and economic conditions. Local governments, especially those of lower-tier cities, tend to be more interested in investing in large cultural venues but pay less attention to cultivating a local cultural environment and attracting marketable performing groups and events, which is reflected in the large regional disparity in the number and diversity of performance resources. Promoting the future development of the live music industry requires a deeper understanding of the practices of live musical performance and changes in the supply chain mediated by new technologies and digital platforms as well as the logic of the daily life of music consumers. Further studies, and possibly comparative studies with the platform societies of other countries, are needed to help formulate policies and strategies that are better adapted to the cultural consumption market and reduce development-oriented resource misallocation and over construction. Such improvements will enable the platform-mediated cultural economy to better serve a post-consumer society.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Mengke Zhang: Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Zuopeng Xiao:** Methodology, Resources, Supervision.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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