

## DOCTORAL THESIS

### Non-Mainstream Sonic Culture in China Amid COVID-19: Reticent Engagements with Live-Streaming

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## ABSTRACT

This research is a timely opportunity to review the responses by sonic cultural practitioners to the lockdowns of the early COVID-19 period in China. In the process we will address the ways in which the emergence of these practices could inform debates on the value of non-mainstream sonic culture under conditions of domination and authoritarianism, as well as their application to other geographies.

Through the lens of these practices, this research addresses its main topic of agency in the context of China. What forms of agency can cultural actors in that context realise in concrete acts? How does a “critical” agency emerge in dominating environments and how do practices critically address the affordances of live-streaming platforms? Can we say that the relation between non-mainstream sonic culture and a live-streaming platform bears witness to an emergent public sphere? And may this emergence equate to the potential for change in society?

The geographical focus for this research is on Mainland China, henceforth referred to simply as “China”, and builds upon this researcher’s existing work on the appearance of non-mainstream sonic culture there. These practices were followed as they entered the field of live-streaming in response to the COVID-19 restrictions in early 2020. The relation between sonic culture and online performance has been covered in various research areas from the point of view of actors’ engagements with media technologies and under pre-COVID-19 social conditions. However, the relatively short duration of the COVID-19 lockdown period posed a limit to the amount of relevant activity and therefore of the resulting research that has been produced on this subject, particularly on the experience in China. This research addresses this lack in quantitative data and qualitative analyses of the activities which took place during this period, filling a gap in attention towards this ephemeral but what this research will argue was a significant set of practices.

Building on social theory related to non-mainstream groups, this research’s answers to the research questions above augment our understanding of the role of sonic culture in the agency of groups that lie outside of the norms that society establishes and enforces. In parallel, the answers address those group’s responses to their progressively mediated interactions under conditions of technological domination.

This research adopts Participant-Observation as its primary mode of ethnography, gathering qualitative and quantitative data from both offline and online locations. This approach includes the self-reflexive concerns of Performative Ethnography to recognise the researcher’s existing links to the field. The need to attend to multiple locations and forms of location, leads to a Multi-Sited Ethnography, also involving a Patchwork Ethnographic approach proposed to respond to the COVID-19 restrictions on travel to research locations. To address the move online, forms of Digital Ethnography are adopted.

In this research, critical agency is a form of agency that institutes contradictions and difficulties that reveal potential for change in the situations that they engage with. Based on the analysis of the actors’ live-streaming activities, two modes of critical agency are found to occur: firstly, there are experiments which are critical of the forms of appearance, but which do not depart from the platforms’ affordances; secondly, there are attempts to translate the practices and ideologies of live performance into live-streamed equivalents in which the resulting contradictions are argued to open up spaces for change.

Sonic culture, as it appeared in China under COVID-19, is here presented as a vibrant means of establishing critical engagements and agency under the conditions of live-streaming. This research will relate this critical agency to wider socio-political critical practices, in China and elsewhere, proposing that nonconfrontational and reticent forms of appearance serve as forms of critical agency for sonic culture under conditions of authoritarian domination.

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