

DIGITAL MUSIC IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA: CULTURAL TRANSMISSION, IDENTITY FORMATION AND SOCIAL COHESION

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Abstract: This article examines the development of China’s digital music industry, focusing on how technological change, institutional responses and platform ecosystems shape the sector. Through careful analysis from multiple perspectives, it clarifies the challenges faced in the digital transformation of cultural industries. As stakeholders respond to rapid shifts, questions of local cultural identity and global reach become central. The author focuses on continued research and dialogue to harness digital change while protecting the rich diversity of China’s musical heritage.

Keywords: *China, Cultural Sectors, Digital Music Industry, Global Ambitions, Globalization, Identity, Technological Disruption.*

1. Introduction

Like literature, music tells stories, evokes layered aesthetics, and communicates ideas and stories through auditory means. It stirs imagination, prompts reflection, and conveys themes that resonate at both personal and collective levels. Songs across genres can be read for their lyrical, symbolic, and narrative richness, offering insight into lived experience and social worlds. However, in today’s global landscape dominated by the narratives of postmodernity, the fusion of digital technologies and cultural practices has given rise to an unprecedented environment of connectivity and transformation. Doreen Massey argues that places are not sealed containers but nodes in wider social relations

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(29). This perspective helps explain how cultural forms circulate beyond fixed boundaries. At the same time, concerns about cultural homogenization remain pressing. Shashi Tharoor (2004) warns that globalization, while enhancing communication and exchange, can also erode diversity and widen inequality. He highlights the role of literature and the arts in safeguarding distinct voices, narrative traditions, and cultural expressions. His call is for a more inclusive form of globalization that respects plural human experiences while addressing structural imbalances (85-91).

These tensions are particularly visible in contemporary China. China combines a long civilizational heritage with swift adoption of digital innovation. The digital age has transformed how people access, produce, and experience music, reshaping aesthetic expectations and everyday listening practices. The spread of streaming services, social media, and mobile technologies has broadened access to musical content and altered norms of cultural production and consumption. Despite regulatory limits and market constraints, audiences now explore diverse genres, discover new artists, and participate in global musical conversations with greater ease.

Scholars have noted similar developments in adjacent cultural fields. Nicoletta Pesaro (2022) observes that a wide range of digital platforms enables Chinese readers to engage literature in new ways (4). In the realm of sound art, Jing Jing Wang (2021) highlights how nonprofessionals contribute creatively to experimental music cultures, revealing grassroots participation in contemporary China (157). Such studies point to a broader pattern in which digital media invite new actors into cultural creation and circulation.

The music industry itself forms part of a larger meta-sector closely tied to information and communication technologies. Researchers such as Li Wuwei and colleagues have shown how, especially since the early twenty-first century, creative industries in China have grown alongside technological infrastructures. As music converges with networked media and digital information systems, new business models, distribution strategies and listening habits have emerged. Yet, this transformation also raises

questions about surveillance, control, and the costs of connectivity.

A poetic reflection by the Irish writer Billy Ramsell (2007) captures this ambivalence. In one stanza, the speaker looks at satellites gliding silently across the night sky while sharing an intimate moment indoors. The image contrasts tenderness with distant technological oversight and evokes an age in which human life unfolds under constant observation. Scholars such as John McMullan interpret such imagery as emblematic of a digital panopticon, where surveillance structures shape everyday experience. This tension between intimacy and technological vastness offers a useful platform for thinking about music in the digital era: a deeply personal art form circulating within expansive, data-driven systems. The broader intellectual backdrop to this inquiry can be found in the work of Erik Svend Larsen (2017), whose study of literature and globalization examines how texts travel across borders and how readers change through global connectivity. His insights encourage reflection on how technology reshapes cultural reception and identity (251-257).

At the heart of this research lies an examination of how digital technologies relate to China’s rich musical heritage. From ancient folk traditions to contemporary pop, China’s soundscape reflects centuries of artistic exchange and innovation. Digital platforms now play an active role in preserving, reinterpreting, and circulating traditional genres while introducing new hybrids that bring local sounds into dialogue with global styles. These developments raise important questions about continuity, reinterpretation, and cultural memory.

This inquiry also considers the wider social implications of these changes. As digital ecosystems become woven into daily routines, music functions as a medium for expressing identity and fostering shared belonging. Online communities form around niche genres, fandoms mobilize around artists, and shared listening practices create new forms of collective experience. In this way, music contributes not only to entertainment but also to social cohesion and cultural dialogue in contemporary Chinese society.

The article pursues three main objectives:

- a. To examine the emergence and early development of China's digital music industry.
- b. To analyze digital disruption, institutional responses, and ecosystem dynamics within the creative industries, with particular attention to music.
- c. To explore, through selected case studies, how industry convergence has influenced the evolution of China's digital music landscape.

The main purpose of this research is to show how digital change affects not only how music is distributed and consumed, but also how cultural heritage is remembered, how identities are formed, and how social bonds are created in the digital age.

2. Dawn of Chinese Digital Music Industry

China's digital music industry has emerged as a distinctive force within a rapidly changing entertainment environment shaped by technological innovation. Scholars such as John Fangjun Li (2013) emphasize that understanding this sector requires distinguishing between "digital music" as a mode of sound production and the "digital music industry" as an institutional and commercial framework (65). This distinction clarifies how technological formats, business models, and cultural practices combine to structure China's contemporary music landscape. Li notes that while many Western scholars define digital music primarily as sound processed into numerical signals through software and recording systems (Cullinan & Oppenheimer; D. Pan; Pohlman), fewer studies address the broader industrial ecosystem that sustains its production and circulation. He expands the concept to include computer-generated sound, digital sampling, MIDI, sequencers, ringtones, online radio, and other formats enabled by hardware and software integration (Li 2013, 66). Importantly, Li highlights how Chinese institutions such as ETTAI and NWICC offer varied definitions of digital music, reflecting the sector's diversity. He further distinguishes between online music (distributed to computers via the internet) and mobile music (delivered through value-added services such as ringtones and streaming), demonstrating how technological infrastructures

shape consumption patterns (66–68).

The growth of digital music in China is inseparable from the rise of social media and virtual communities. Dholakia et al. (2004) explain this through “social identity” theory, arguing that individuals form collective identities through participation in online networks (241–263). Such digital environments encourage sharing, discovery, and participation, transforming listeners into active contributors within musical cultures. The broader expansion of information technology after 1998, following the establishment of Google (CIT), laid the groundwork for digital services in China. Intense competition between Chinese firms and global platforms such as Google, Facebook, and Amazon eventually produced China’s major internet conglomerates: Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent (BAT) (2, 4–5). By 2015, these firms had consolidated their dominance and strategically shifted toward streaming services, recognizing their cultural and economic potential. BAT’s acquisition of platforms such as iQIYI (Baidu), Youku (Alibaba), and Tencent Video reflects this shift and parallels transformations in global entertainment driven by platforms like Google/YouTube, Apple, Amazon, and Netflix. Chinese scholars note both the opportunities and challenges this poses for international competitiveness and cultural influence. Within this context, the development of China’s digital music industry mirrors wider global trends while also serving national ambitions related to media expansion and soft power.

3. Digital Disruption and Ecosystem Change

It is essential to analyze how technological disruption, organizational adaptation, and evolving ecosystem structures explain the development of the digital music industry within contemporary creative sectors. Early institutional analyses of the music industry by Blanc and Huault (2014) and Dobusch and Schüßler (2014) demonstrated how incumbent actors attempted to preserve established arrangements in the face of digitization. Foundational institutional theorists such as DiMaggio and Powell (1991) and Zysman (1994) emphasized shared norms, isomorphism and equilibrium within organizational fields. However, Meyer et al. (2005) criticized these approaches for

privileging stability over transformation, arguing that such models inadequately explain rapidly changing industries shaped by digital technologies. In response, scholars proposed more dynamic analytical frameworks. El Sawy et al. (2010) characterized these contexts as conditions of 'hyper turbulence,' requiring new methodological and conceptual orientations. Science and Technology Studies (STS), especially through Callon (1998), Anderson and Lundvall (1988), and MacKenzie and Wajcman (1999), highlighted the importance of distributed social learning, technological mediation and the co-evolution of actors, artefacts and practices. Meyer et al. (2005) similarly advocated for coevolutionary, multilevel, processual and contextual approaches suited to fields undergoing significant transformation, drawing parallels with biographical studies of artefacts and practices.

Ecosystem-oriented perspectives further advanced this discussion. Wareham et al. (2014), Moore (1993) and Adner (2012) examined platform-centered governance and multilateral value creation, though often presuming structural stability. In contrast, Tang and Lyons (2017) argued that ecological conceptualizations without fixed boundaries more accurately capture the evolution of China's digital music industry, echoing Abbott's (1988) emphasis on fluid professional ecologies. Wang et al. (2015) and Lewin and Volberda (1999) emphasized how contextual alignments, mobility and constraint shape divergent ecosystem outcomes. Insights from management scholarship complement these perspectives. McGrath (2010) proposed discovery-driven planning for uncertain environments, while Sosna et al. (2010), Thompson and MacMillan (2010), and Massa et al. (2017) highlighted experimentation, trial-and-error learning, and the balance between exploration and exploitation in emerging markets. Hadida and Paris (2014) further critiqued linear value-chain models for failing to account for the multiplicity of intermediaries and value propositions in digital creative industries. All these theoretical contributions offer a robust framework for understanding China's digital music sector as an evolving configuration shaped by experimentation, contextual constraints and adaptive organizational strategies within fluid digital ecologies.

4. Towards Global Industry Convergence

China’s digital music industry exemplifies how technological advancement, industrial convergence and cultural exchange collectively reshape creative sectors in a global context. It reflects a rapidly changing environment in which boundaries between media, technology and culture are increasingly porous. Wi-Chung Ho (2003) observes that the digital regime has transformed music consumption in ways that affect cultural transmission, identity formation, preservation and social cohesion (143–157). In his later work, Ho (2021) reframes globalization not as unilateral cultural domination but as a process of cultural interweaving, citing phenomena such as the global popularity of Bollywood cinema and the transnational spread of Japanese-style karaoke to demonstrate how cultural forms circulate through adaptation rather than replacement (26–28).

Within this context, China’s digital music industry has been shaped by the convergence of streaming technologies, social media, e-commerce and gaming ecosystems. The widespread use of smartphones and high-speed internet accelerated the popularity of music streaming services. Corporations such as Tencent Music Entertainment consolidated platforms including QQ Music, Kugou Music, and Kuwo Music, while firms like Alibaba Group and NetEase embedded music services within broader entertainment and social platforms. This convergence generated new synergies between music, social networking, online retail, and interactive media, expanding monetization strategies and patterns of user engagement.

The transformation of Baidu provides a suitable case study. As Shen et al. (2018) recount, Baidu’s early MP3 search service (2004) facilitated widespread access to pirated music, making it a central source of unlicensed content. A legal settlement in October 2012 marked a turning point, leading to the rebranding of its services as Baidu Music and a shift toward licensed distribution. The introduction of revenue-sharing mechanisms and the 2015 merger with Taihe Music Group signalled institutional commitment to legality and market sustainability. Although Baidu later lost market share due to the rise of freemium streaming competitors, its trajectory from piracy facilitator to

legitimate provider illustrates how regulatory compliance became essential for long-term viability in the digital music economy.

Digital platforms have also empowered independent artists by reducing reliance on traditional record labels. Applications such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu function as promotional and monetization spaces where musicians cultivate audiences, engage fans, and benefit from advertising and virtual gifting. Reports by Tracy Qu (2022) and Lance Concannon (2013) show how influencer cultures on these platforms influence e-commerce, brand visibility, and creative entrepreneurship, reflecting broader shifts in cultural production.

China's digital music scene is also closely linked to global musical exchanges. Cross-border licensing agreements expose domestic audiences to international genres while Chinese artists increasingly gain overseas visibility. The hip-hop group *Higher Brothers* offers an illustrative example through the song *Made in China* (2017). As Lauren Teixeira (2018) argues, the bilingual lyrics create a transnational aesthetic that addresses both Chinese and English-speaking listeners while incorporating regionally grounded references. The song challenges assumptions about the incompatibility of Chinese language and rap, asserting cultural confidence in global hip-hop discourse. At the same time, the guest verse by Famous Dex reveals lingering stereotypes, demonstrating how negotiations of power, identity, and representation remain complex within global music circulation. Thus, China's digital music industry reveals how technological infrastructures, legal reforms, platform economies and cultural creativity converge within a globalized environment. From corporate consolidation and regulatory adaptation to grassroots artistic participation and transnational musical flows, the sector highlights the delicate balance between preserving local cultural specificity and pursuing global cultural presence.

5. Conclusion

Digitalization has become a decisive force in China's music industry, reflecting wider global transformations in cultural production and consumption. Perspectives drawn from geography, literature and sociology illuminate how technology,

culture and society shape contemporary music practices and enable unprecedented access, distribution and participation. At the same time, institutional critiques caution against the risks of cultural homogenization and the erosion of identity in the context of a globalized network. Such concerns foreground music’s role in sustaining cultural memory and social belonging amid industrial and technological change. The evolution of China’s music sector exposes how identity is negotiated within shifting digital environments and reconfigured industrial structures. The industry’s development has been shaped by major technology corporations alongside the creative agency of independent artists who operate across domestic and global platforms. Ongoing tensions between structural stability and adaptive flexibility, highlighted in Science and Technology Studies and organizational research, remain central to understanding the Chinese digital music industry’s future prospect.

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