

# *The Sonic Construction of 'Shanghai-Ness': Subcultural Music Venues and the Regulation of Street Performers*

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**Abstract:** Building on the increasingly topic of soundscape research in urban ethnomusicology, this article focuses on the city of Shanghai, China, as a case study to explore the cultural formation of "Shanghai-ness". Through extensive fieldwork and the analysis of two representative cases, including the spatial distribution of subcultural music venues and the institutional regulation of street performers, this study investigates how musical practices reflect broader urban dynamics. It argues that Shanghai's soundscape is shaped by a complex and evolving cultural tension involving both mainstream recognition and marginal creativity, as well as structured governance and grassroots expression. Rather than viewing these tensions as contradictions, the study interprets them as part of a dynamic cultural ecology that supports the city's vitality during ongoing social transformation. In conclusion, the article suggests that "Shanghai-ness" is not a fixed identity but a continuously negotiated process formed through the interaction of space, sound, and power within the urban context.

## 1. Introduction

The concept of *soundscape*, as an emerging research orientation in the field of human geography, has also been gaining momentum within the discipline of Ethnomusicology. The term "soundscape" was first introduced in the 1960s by Canadian musician R. Murray Schafer, who viewed it as a sound environment shaped by individual or societal perception and understanding. In the realm of Ethnomusicology, Schellme defined soundscape as a combination of *background*, *sound*, and *meaning*, distinctive to a specific musical culture. In his definition, *background* refers to the performance location and the behaviors of performers and audiences; *sound* encompasses timbre, pitch, duration, and intensity; and *meaning* denotes both the inherent meaning of the music itself and its significance to the lives of the performers and listeners[1]. Thus, this tripartite cognitive mechanism—background, sound, and meaning—serves as a theoretical foundation for studying the soundscape as a cultural whole.

In Chinese musicological academia, existing literature tends to focus on the expression of local cultural characteristics. For example, Xue Yibing examined the spatial distribution of soundscapes and their connection to regional spaces, arguing that regional space and local identity are the core elements[2]. Zhang Xiaohong analyzed the revolutionary cultural imagery and symbolic soundscape

construction of Northern Shaanxi folk songs under the influence of modern political movements[3]. Liu Yutang and Jiang Yuwei interpreted the chimes of the Hankow Customs as a form of sound heritage, aiming to evoke emotional resonance among generations of Wuhan residents and establish a sense of place and emotional attachment between individuals and the city[4]. Shen Jihaolan highlighted the distinctive soundscape of Beijing through the embedding of traditional sounds within modern urban cultural tourism projects[5].

Basing on previous research that explores how urban soundscapes reflect local cultural characteristics, this paper turns to Shanghai to examine how the city's musical soundscape both mirrors and shapes its unique urban identity in Nowadays. While much attention has been given to localized sound practices in smaller or historically distinct regions, there remains a lack of in-depth, field-based analysis of how a global metropolis like Shanghai negotiates its musical diversity and spatial-cultural dynamics. This study seeks to answer the following questions: how is musical diversity distributed across Shanghai's urban landscape? What imbalances exist within this diversity? And how do institutional mechanisms, such as the licensing system for street performers, embody broader traits of "Shanghai-ness"? To address these questions, the paper is divided into three sections: first, it analyzes the spatial distribution of subcultural music venues to reveal the uneven geography of musical life; second, it examines the regulated yet flexible street music system as a model of orderly openness; and finally, it considers how these dynamics collectively construct a complex, hybrid notion of "Shanghai-ness" through the city's evolving soundscape.

## 2. The Unevenness Within Cultural Diversity: A Case Study of Subcultural Music Venues in Shanghai

As an internationally renowned metropolis, Shanghai has long been celebrated for its cultural inclusiveness and openness to diversity. Its complex economic, cultural, and social structures make it distinctive within China. As scholar Luo Qin observed, "Nowhere else in the world can one find a city as complex as Shanghai," and "Musical Shanghai transcends the boundaries of local knowledge." [6] However, through daily observation and field engagement, I have come to recognize that beneath the surface of musical diversity lies a significant spatial imbalance. This section uses the spatial distribution of subcultural music venues as an entry point to explore the diversity and structural disparities within Shanghai's urban soundscape.

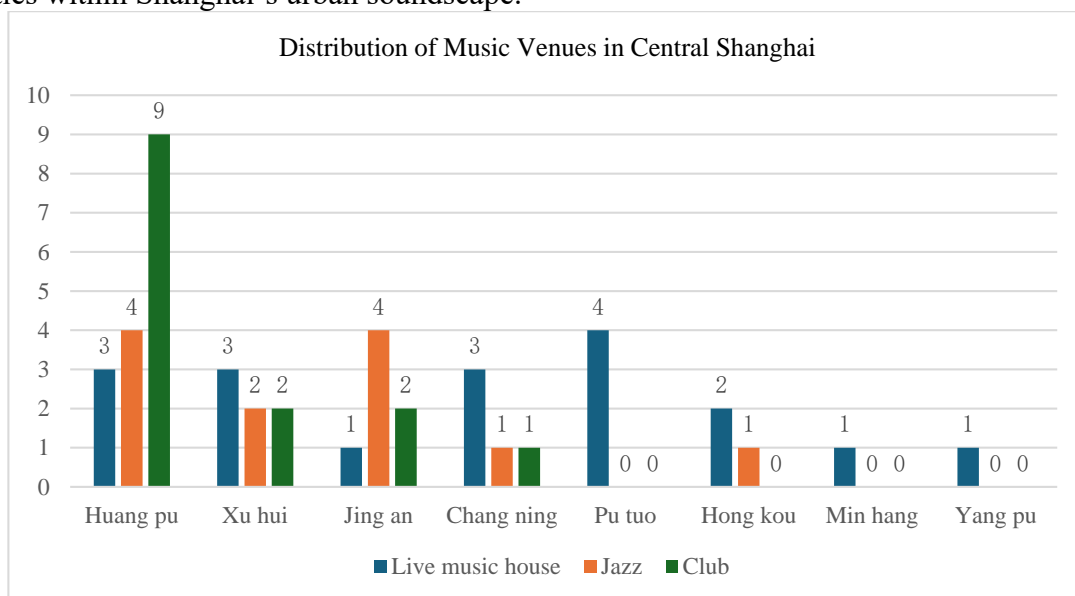


Figure 1: Distribution of Music Venues in Central Shanghai

Based on field research, a survey was conducted on live music venues, jazz venues, and electronic music clubs operating in eight key central districts: Huang pu, Xu hui, Jing an, Pu tuo, Yang pu, Chang ning, Hong kou, and Min hang (see Figure 1):

In terms of overall numbers, Huangpu District shows the highest concentration of music venues, with a total of 16, covering all three categories. Xuhui and Jingan follow, with Xuhui exhibiting a more balanced distribution and Jingan showing a strong emphasis on Jazz. Other districts, such as Putuo, Yangpu, and Changning, have no more than five venues. In terms of clustering characteristics, electronic music venues are mostly concentrated around Yandang Road in Huangpu, jazz venues around the Tonglefang area in Jingan, and Live music houses along Yuyuan Road and Yichang Road. Although the number of venues for each genre appears relatively balanced, my fieldwork reveals that jazz venues are more active, enjoy higher audience engagement, and host events more frequently, indicating their central role in the city's music scene. These patterns suggest that while musical diversity coexists across districts, significant disparities remain in both spatial distribution and cultural participation.

The question then arises: what accounts for this cultural imbalance, and how does it reflect what might be called the “distinct Shanghainess”? I argue that this is closely tied to the historical construction and functional differentiation of urban space. As Henri Lefebvre has stated in his theory of social space, “The production of social space is also the production and reproduction of social relations.” In other words, social relations are not only shaped within specific spatial contexts but also serve to reproduce and define the functions of these spaces.

In Shanghai, core districts such as Xuhui, Huangpu, and Jing'an have long served as hubs of upscale residential life, historical architecture, and cultural landmarks. These areas not only possess rich historical resources and aesthetic symbols but also attract people from diverse social backgrounds whose lifestyles naturally demand complex and varied cultural offerings. This has created fertile ground for subcultural music venues to take root, fostering new social networks. For instance, the mention of “Shanghai jazz” immediately evokes venues like JZ Club. Similarly, the early location of Yuyintang which is Shanghai's iconic underground rock venue in Kaixuan Road, Changning District, was no accident, which means the area's vibrant youth subculture and cultural atmosphere made it a natural fit. Though the Kaixuan Road location has since closed, it remains a symbolic coordinate of Shanghai's underground rock scene, continuing to influence the growth of independent music venues.

These dynamics suggest that within the city's historically determined planning logic, different districts assume different social functions and cultural roles, thereby enabling or constraining the development of specific music cultures. The result is a dynamic interplay between spatial structure and cultural demand that has shaped Shanghai's “diverse yet uneven” musical landscape.

Furthermore, I conducted fieldwork at one of Shanghai's key landmarks of musical subculture: Yuyintang Music Park, and interviewing co-founder Lao Li and Li Qi who is a guitarist of the band *Zhongshan Zhi Feng*. A casual remark before a charity performance: “Why is the audience so small today?”- sparked Lao Li's deeper reflection on the state of Shanghai's rock scene. He responded candidly: *“This is the norm. Full houses are rare. The venue only holds about fifty people anyway.”* When asked, “Isn't Yuyintang the go-to place for rock music in Shanghai?” he replied, *“That was a long time ago. Rock has always been on the margins here.”* According to his observations, jazz performances now draw larger and more stable audiences. Although some rock bands gained popularity through reality shows, *“once they make it big, they never come back.”* Asked whether any local bands could represent Shanghai, he answered flatly: *“None.”* Having been part of the band community himself, he has witnessed many musicians quitting or switching careers. *“Take the owner of MAO Livehouse, for example, he used to play in a band but gave it up.”*

This marginalization of rock music was echoed by guitarist Li Qi, who remarked, *“It's almost impossible to survive playing rock in Shanghai. Once you have a family, you have to pivot. We've*

*moved toward blues and bluegrass because there's much more demand."*

This phenomenon illustrates that Shanghai's musical diversity is not synonymous with balance. Jazz, by contrast, enjoys a privileged position thanks to its deep historical roots and cultural embeddedness. As early as the 20th century, jazz took root in Shanghai and gradually fused with the city's refined lifestyle. Today, from frequent jazz festivals to specialized education and professionalized performance circuits, jazz has permeated urban life in multifaceted ways. Academic interest in "Shanghai jazz" also remains strong. A search for the term in CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) yields over 50 articles covering topics from history and aesthetics to market development. This scholarly engagement has further reinforced jazz's dominant status in the city's musical discourse.

Often considered China's most international city, Shanghai is associated with a refined and cosmopolitan sensibility—exemplified by popular cultural memes such as "Shanghai people love coffee." In this context, jazz resonates with the city's identity because its musical language aligns seamlessly with the urban temperament.

Therefore, from the perspective of urban soundscape distribution, the "Shanghai-ness" of musical development lies not in uniform diversity, but rather in an uneven plurality, in which jazz music occupies the core while other genres remain marginalized.

This phenomenon reveals a deeper cultural logic underlying Shanghai's musical landscape: diversity, in this context, functions not as an egalitarian coexistence of genres but as a stratified hierarchy shaped by historical memory, cultural alignment, and socio-spatial infrastructure. Jazz music's privileged status is not simply the result of its artistic merit; rather, it reflects its compatibility with the symbolic vocabulary of the city, which includes cosmopolitanism, refinement, and globally oriented middle-class aesthetics. From early 20th-century ballrooms to contemporary jazz festivals and educational institutions, jazz has established a lasting resonance with Shanghai's urban imagination as an elegant and outward-looking metropolis. This alignment is further reinforced by academic attention, commercial promotion, and governmental cultural policies, which together form a powerful cycle of legitimation and public visibility.

In contrast, other subcultural music forms such as rock, indie, or electronic music often remain at the margins. Their peripheral status is not due to a lack of creativity, cultural relevance, or audience engagement, but rather to their dissonance with dominant urban narratives. These genres typically rely on informal or underground spaces, receive limited institutional support, and are more susceptible to changing regulatory or market conditions. While they may be highly valued within niche communities, their cultural significance is seldom recognized or translated into symbolic capital within the broader discourse on urban culture.

This pattern of distribution can be understood as a form of aesthetic stratification, where different music genres are unequally granted access to space, resources, and legitimacy. The result is not a truly open cultural field, but what might be described as curated pluralism, a condition in which cultural diversity is selectively embraced. Certain genres are elevated as authentic representations of the city's global image, while others are quietly tolerated or structurally constrained.

Therefore, the "Shanghai-ness" of the city's soundscape is rooted not in balanced cultural heterogeneity but in a selectively constructed and ideologically mediated hierarchy. This challenges simplistic narratives that celebrate urban cultural diversity, and instead calls for a more critical understanding of how music, governance, and urban branding intersect to shape the sonic production of place. In this context, music functions not only as an expressive art form but also as a medium through which cultural identity, social distinction, and spatial power are continuously negotiated and reproduced.

### 3. Orderly Openness: The Urban Soundscape of Licensed Street Performers in Shanghai

While the spatial distribution of music venues reveals a hierarchical landscape of cultural accessibility in Shanghai, where jazz occupies the symbolic center and other genres remain marginalized, this perspective does not fully capture the diversity and complexity of the city's sonic environment. Music in Shanghai is not confined to formal spaces such as concert halls, clubs, or institutional venues. It also emerges in the rhythms of daily life, in public squares, on street corners, and along riverside promenades. These everyday soundscapes, though often overlooked or considered informal, are essential to understanding how the city negotiates identity, creativity, and space.

Among these public sound practices, street music plays a particularly significant role. It occupies a unique position at the intersection of spontaneity and regulation, blending grassroots artistic expression with increasingly structured forms of governance. Rather than being shaped solely by market forces or cultural capital, street performance in Shanghai is managed through a formal licensing system that sets it apart from more loosely organized or underground music scenes. This system does more than regulate—it reflects the city's broader strategies of cultural management, aiming to balance public order with creative visibility.

Street music, therefore, is not merely a form of entertainment. It serves as a lens through which we can observe Shanghai's distinctive approach to cultural policy and urban aesthetics. It provides an alternative model of musical participation, one that supplements and in some ways challenges the structured hierarchies found in venue-based music culture. The following section investigates this phenomenon in depth, focusing on how licensed street performers navigate institutional mechanisms, perform in public spaces, and contribute to the evolving soundscape of Shanghai. Through this case, we may better understand how "Shanghainess" is produced not only through spatial inequality, but also through forms of regulated openness that blend control with cultural dynamism.

Today, street music has become an indispensable part of urban musical culture. According to a report by *Youth Daily*, Shanghai took the lead in October 2014 by launching a licensing system for street performers in Jing'an District, marking a pioneering step in the management of street music in Chinese cities. As the first city in the country to implement such a mechanism, Shanghai has witnessed remarkable growth over the past decade. The number of licensed street performers has risen from just 8 to more than 380, and authorized performance venues have expanded from the initial Jing'an Park Square to include various locations such as the Fudu Riverside, International Fashion Center, Daning Music Plaza, Tianan Qianshu Plaza, Bingu Plaza, and Jincha 8 Lane, among others.

What regulatory frameworks underpin this rapid expansion? And what does this phenomenon reveal about the particular urban character or "Shanghainess" embedded in the city's governance of music culture? In an effort to explore these questions, I conducted fieldwork at two key performance locations: Jing'an Park Square and the vicinity of Changning's Da Rong Cheng (Joy City). Observations were supplemented by in-depth conversations with several street performers (see Figures 2).



Figure 2: Street Performers near Changning Da Rong Cheng



Figure 3: Street Performers near Jing'an Park Square

In terms of performance format, the street performers at Jing'an Park Square (see Figure 3) are typically duos. Their operational model involves audiences scanning a QR code to pay and request songs, after which the performers rotate roles between lead vocals and accompaniment based on the selected tracks. The song repertoire is dominated by Chinese pop music, with relatively few English-language songs. In contrast, the street performers at Da Rong Cheng (Joy City) generally perform solo, accompanying themselves while singing. Audiences at both locations interact through the same QR code-based system for song selection and tipping.

In an interview with street performer Luo Fuhai, the following details about the licensing system were revealed:

(1) To obtain a street performer's license, applicants must demonstrate proficiency in at least one musical instrument and pass both an examination and a training session organized by the China Association of Performing Arts. They are then required to sign an agreement promising to adhere to specific guidelines, such as refraining from disturbing the public, setting up unauthorized stalls, or violating municipal regulations. Performances must follow the "four fixeds" principle: fixed time, fixed place, fixed personnel, and fixed content. Only after meeting these conditions can performers receive a three-month probationary or official license, which must be renewed at the end of each term.

(2) Performance locations are not randomly assigned. Instead, they are coordinated by municipal authorities through a centralized scheduling system, typically managed via a WeChat group.



Performers submit applications for time slots and locations in advance, and the scheduling results determine where they are allowed to perform. For instance, Jing'an Park requires performances to be by at least two musicians, whereas certain other areas permit solo acts. If scheduling permits, performers may apply to perform at multiple locations within the same day.

(3) Performers are expected to maintain a clean and appropriate appearance. Wearing eccentric or inappropriate clothing is strictly prohibited.

Furthermore, I observe that street performers at these locations utilize the Douyin platform for real-time livestreaming, accepting online tips, effectively becoming "cloud-performing" artists who operate both online and offline. This emerging performance model transcends the traditional reliance of street music solely on live audience donations. It significantly expands the performers' reach and influence, while also diversifying and modernizing the avenues for street music dissemination.

Contemporary street music in China has moved far beyond the traditional notion of "busking" and differs significantly from its definition within American socio-cultural contexts. Within China's specific social and cultural environment, street music is undergoing a revitalization. It is no longer a marginal performance art form but is increasingly being integrated into the formal occupational system, with licensing becoming the standard procedure. The establishment of this system not only safeguards performers' legitimate rights but also enhances performance quality and management standards. Consequently, it attracts a diverse range of participants, including local youth, migrant workers, and returnees from overseas, fostering a rich and varied ecosystem of street music talent.

In this process, while street music outwardly exhibits characteristics of "mobility, spontaneity, and non-contractuality"[7], meaning flexible performance times, locations, and content, which means it actually operates under a framework of rigorous management and orderly mechanisms. Measures such as the centralized scheduling and vetting of performance venues, along with standardized requirements for repertoire, performer numbers, and attire, ensure the smooth functioning of street music activities and the maintenance of public order.

The interaction between performers and audiences has evolved into a multi-layered and multi-channel system of engagement and support. This includes song requests via QR code scanning, live tipping, and online livestream donations. This organic integration of online and offline elements not only enriches the expressive power of street music but also empowers street artists to showcase their talents on broader platforms. This further drives innovation and development within urban music culture.

This ecosystem, shaped by the interplay of standardized management and cultural diversity, embodies Shanghai's unique soundscape. It successfully preserves the free and open spirit inherent to street music while establishing orderly operational mechanisms. This makes it one of the earliest instances in China achieving "managed openness" within a street music ecosystem. This achievement highlights Shanghai's characteristic inclusiveness and innovative capacity as an international metropolis. It also reflects the city's wisdom and foresight in cultural governance, showcasing the unique charm of "Shanghainess", a dynamic equilibrium blending order with vitality, and tradition with modernity.

#### 4. Conclusion

Professor Luo Qin systematically summarizes the "four-dimensionality" of Shanghai's urban music. These four dimensions include: *locality and its symbolic significance, regionality and its agglomerative power, transregionality and its radiative influence, and its global impact*[6]. This analytical framework not only enriches the understanding of Shanghai's musical culture but also provides a valuable theoretical lens for examining the city's unique cultural identity—what can be termed "Shanghai-ness."

Drawing on rich fieldwork, the present study engages with Luo Qin's framework, especially re-examining the dimension of *locality and its symbolic significance*, to develop a more individualized interpretation of "Shanghai-ness." From my view, Shanghai's soundscape is not merely a residue of its historical and cultural past, but rather a dynamic product of urban social relations, spatial structures, and cultural interactions. Specifically, mainstream musical forms such as jazz have received widespread recognition and substantial institutional support in Shanghai. This not only reflects prevailing cultural preferences but also demonstrates the combined effects of economic capital, policy orientation, and market mechanisms. By contrast, subcultural genres such as rock and street music, although situated at the margins, contribute distinctive vitality and creativity to the urban cultural landscape. These forms infuse the city's soundscape with diversity, energy, and tension.

It is precisely this complex and dynamic cultural tension that sustains Shanghai's robust cultural vitality amid ongoing social transformations. The intersection and interaction of multiple cultural layers foster continuous innovation, enabling Shanghai to remain a city that is constantly reinventing itself like vibrant, resilient, and culturally unique. In this sense, the city's soundscape is not merely an assemblage of musical practices and auditory experiences, but a living expression of urban cultural identity and social connectivity. It vividly embodies the essence of "Shanghainess" as a distinct urban spirit and cultural temperament.

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