

Negotiating Artistic Identity: Geographic Mobility and Creative Labour among Migrant Musicians in Shenzhen

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Introduction

As a Southern Chinese immigrant city, Shenzhen features a fast-paced growth of the music ecosystem due to its high level of population mobility. Unlike many other Chinese cities that have had a long history of developing their own local artistic traditions, Shenzhen's music scene has been predominantly influenced by the work of young creative migrant workers who come to Shenzhen from all over the country. Many amateur and professional musicians move to Shenzhen because they are looking for artistic opportunities, a space to perform consistently, and an environment that is open culturally. Therefore, migrant musicians are a primary element of Shenzhen's grass roots music ecosystem and create a local scene which differs significantly from the scenes found in Beijing, Shanghai and other well-developed cultural centers. While the scope of this article does not include a comparative analysis of these three cities, it does use the distinction between them as a means to position the unique starting point of Shenzhen. This research utilizes urban ethnomusicology, creative labor studies and scholarship related to urban music scenes as analytical lenses to explore the lived experiences of mobile music practitioners.

By drawing on such areas of scholarship, the focus of this study will be on internal migrant musicians who are currently living in Shenzhen. The main goal of this study is to examine how cross-city geographic mobility can influence and change a musician's creative work and their artistic identity. This study will use first-hand interview data as well as using digital media as employment opportunities. This study is focused on the relationship between migration and place. The overall objective of this study is to produce relevant and local empirical data that can illustrate how mobile musicians negotiate their artistic identities and manage their precarious creative labor following relocation.

Who are the internal migrant musicians in Shenzhen?

Internal migrant musicians refer to music practitioners who relocate to other cities within the same country for various reasons and continue to pursue music professionally or as enthusiasts. As studies show, musicians gather in an urban city because it concentrates performance places, working partners and social network, and those things are difficult to have in a small city (British Council, 2017). This study involves internal migrants between major cities in China, who experience a change of scenery nevertheless. Besides, the grassroots and formal music scene mostly work through informal peer communication, offline company and oral recommendations, not formal institutions. Artistic collaboration and performance opportunities are built from continuing social interaction in the local creative community (Pedrini et al., 2022).

Specifically, this study concerns musicians who migrate to Shenzhen from different cities to settle and engage in music creation, performance, and teaching. They have been living in Shenzhen for different lengths of time. The study uses semi-structured interviews as a core research method. The interviews are designed to focus on participants' cross-city migration experiences, artistic cognition after relocation and daily musical labour statues, in order to collect real, individualized lived experiences of migrant musicians in Shenzhen.

Four participants took part in this project: a 33-year-old male music teacher trained at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore, who returned to China and settled in Shenzhen after overseas study; a 26-year-old male rap and rock enthusiast with a background in mathematics and software engineering, who moved from Shanghai to Shenzhen; a 40-year-old male music institution owner and part-time instrument and vocal teacher, who relocated from Beijing; and a 38-year-old female singer originally from Yunnan, with past performance and fieldwork experience across Southeast Asia, Europe and Australia. One interview was conducted offline in a piano room and others were

conducted online, each video interview lasting between 50 and 70 minutes. Short follow-up messages were sent after each conversation to clarify unclear points and fill minor gaps in participants' accounts. Despite some limitations which I will discuss in the conclusion, this method is useful because it provides flexible and open communication, which allows participants to narrate their artistic and migrant experiences and not be limited by rigid questionnaire constraints (Kakilla, 2021).

How does geographic mobility reshape artistic identity and creative work?

Scholarships that relate to migrant musician's mobility and creativity can be categorized into three overlapping clusters. The first is research about how migrant musicians define their own artistic identities, as well as where they feel like they belong (place-based belonging). The second is research on informal peer networks among migrant musicians, and the challenges of precariously employed creative workers. The third is research on digital media as another way for creative works to receive attention. All of these groups of scholarship provide the foundation for my investigation, but they also highlight some gaps that I am investigating in my study of internally migrating musicians in Shenzhen.

The first cluster centers on the long-term impact of pre-migration local cultures on the artistic identities of mobile musicians. Ethnomusicologists and researchers of migration have developed different perspectives regarding the transformation of origin-based artistic identity following migration. Kenny and Lukiancheko claim that relocating from one's native community results in a loss of stability and validity in the artist's identity, which has been established through the validation of the community. While moving will result in a loss of social and symbolic capital accumulated by the creator for many years, the artistic knowledge and cultural perspectives that have been developed prior to relocating can be considered as an ongoing source of creativity that the creator brings with him to the new scene rather than discarding it (Kenny et al., 2026). Parzer

states that many recently immigrated or refugee artists resist the use of external branding as an indication of their ethnicity or country of origin. They understand that being labeled with a specific cultural label will limit their ability to participate in markets where they are able to sell their work, as well as limiting the ways in which they may create their art (Parzer, 2023). There are two main perspectives within each of the above discussions: one is the continued influence of place-based background on creativity, and the second is how mobile artists will interact with, challenge, or even deny local identities imposed on them by others. This study specifically addresses the interaction between these two forces. Like other studies, this research supports the idea that the pre-migrant experience continues to impact the way in which musicians make creative decisions. It borrows from what has been previously discussed about the experiences of musicians in terms of their geographic location to investigate internal migration in urban China. Most of the previously mentioned research concerns migrants facing transnational legal obstacles. In contrast, this study looks at identity negotiation by internal migrants who experience intangible restrictions during the process of transition.

The second cluster examines informal peer networks as gatekeeping mechanisms within precarious creative labour. Merkel points out that most independent creative economies do not use structured, formal hiring practices. New entrants to creative fields usually find work opportunities through casual referral, chance meetings, and peer-to-peer recommendation (Merkel, 2018). While these types of informal connections allow new entrants to gain entry to performing opportunities, local knowledge, and practical assistance, they also create risk. Work opportunities are based upon the quality of the individual's relationships with others and their level of "social luck" as opposed to using consistent, standardized criteria for evaluation. Most of the research to date has focused on the precariousness of creative work in Western-based freelance and co-working environments. This project will build on that previous research. It will look at how the peer networks that act as gatekeepers operate in an urban live music environment in China, and how the migrant musicians'

newly established or weak social connections can be disrupted by moving to a new location. While Merkel's work identifies the structural vulnerabilities associated with referral-based creative work, this project will take a closer look at how migrant musicians rely on their peer migrant and co-ethnic networks for their first access to the unfamiliar music markets they find themselves in.

The third cluster explores digital media as a secondary channel for migrant artists to gain creative visibility. Ramayuda and her co-researchers note that digital platforms offer independent musicians the possibility of building audiences outside offline local music circuits. Still, online popularity does not translate cleanly into stable paid musical labour; digital legitimacy remains entangled with offline scene recognition and in-person industry connections, producing uneven outcomes for mobile creators (Ramayuda et al., 2025). Gardiner notes that much of the current literature has split along two lines of thought regarding how social media can be viewed by creative professionals; some see it as an equalizing tool which allows creative professionals to lower the barriers to entry into their respective audiences (Gardiner, 2025). Conversely, others view social media as a form of labor organization (platform-based) that contributes to the creation of unstable employment relationships and the resulting income volatility experienced by those who rely on social media platforms for income.

Overall, the majority of the literature on internal migrant popular musicians in China's southern urban music scenes has focused primarily on transnational migrants, displaced musicians, and creative professionals who have relocated to Western countries. According to Kielman, there is still very little written about the experiences of internal migrant popular musicians living and working in China's southern urban music scenes, despite the fact that these urban centers are home to large populations of highly mobile creative workers whose lives are influenced by internal migration (Kielman, 2022). By bringing together the different streams of scholarship on internal migrant popular musicians in China's southern urban music scenes with a study of the local music scene that

has been created by internal mobility, I will examine how internal migrant popular musicians create their identity as an artist; find employment through gig work; and use digital media in ways that are similar to, and different from, the practices observed among internal migrant popular musicians in other parts of the world.

Artistic identity

Kenny and Lukiancheko argue that migration disrupts the established, socially-sanctioned identities of artists, as well as stripping away the social and symbolic capital accumulated by the migrating creator. However, those artistic dispositions and cultural sensibilities formed prior to relocation are not abandoned. Rather, they serve as a dynamic creative resource which artists take with them into their new environment (Kenny et al., 2026). Similarly, Parzer argues that once an artist arrives in a new cultural field, he or she has to establish a professional reputation from scratch, although the artist's previous artistic history will influence the artist's current creative process (Parzer, 2023).

Firstly, migrant musicians bring their own aesthetic values, performance styles and cultural heritage from where they grew up, or other places they have worked, to bear on their creative output in Shenzhen. One of the interviewees, Vita, is a lounge singer who originally came from Yunnan. She lost all of the connections she had made as an artist and professional in Yunnan when she moved to Shenzhen. When she arrived, she didn't know anyone in the Shenzhen music scene; she hadn't established herself yet. After being turned away by several live music venues and bars, Vita finally received her first chance to perform in Shenzhen because another migrant from Yunnan referred her to a venue. Although Vita was able to build her music career in Shenzhen from scratch, she still uses the cultural heritage of Yunnan to influence her singing style and the songs that she selects to perform today. Tim is a music educator whose career has included working in Singapore, Beijing and Shanghai. He moved to Shenzhen to begin a new job as a Music Education Director.

Unfortunately for him, this job fell through as soon as he arrived. As Tim started to build a new

career as a music educator in Shenzhen, the experiences that he had gained working as an artist and educator across three different cities became the basis for his teaching methods and performance strategies. Therefore, the results of this research support Kenny and Lukiancheko's claim that although geographic mobility does not eliminate the artistic background that exists prior to migrating, it does create different social environments for artists to apply their inherited creative abilities (Kenny et al., 2026).

Secondly, while Vita and Tim's current art making processes continue to rely on the artistic practices of the past in order to develop their creative labor, they have made it clear that they do not wish to be viewed as "regional artists." They feel that being labeled as such will limit their ability to establish an artistic identity separate from the places where they grew up or attended school. Vita states that she wants to be known as a lover of music and not as a "Yunnan singer." Tim wants to be known as a musician first rather than a "Singapore-educated musician." These statements demonstrate that internally migrant artists refuse to allow themselves to be limited by labels associated with their geographical origins in order to have creative freedom, prevent audiences from having expectations about their work, and prevent being seen as part of a particular niche market due to their origin (Parzer, 2023). This research expands upon Parzer's research on transnational displacement by examining internal migration rather than transnational displacement. Unlike the refugees in Parzer's research, Vita and Tim are able to legally reside in China and are not considered refugees; however, like the refugees, Vita and Tim refuse to accept labels based upon their geographic origins since they moved within China. Despite internally migrating, Vita and Tim demonstrate similar tendencies to view themselves as mobile musicians through their rejection of labels identifying them as artists from a particular region. Therefore, Vita's and Tim's stories demonstrate that upon migrating to another city, their artistic identity develops through two processes: they continue to draw upon their previous artistic experiences as a means of generating

new ideas for their creative labor, and they identify themselves as independent mobile musicians through the rejection of externally imposed definitions of their geographic identity.

Peer social network

Merkel has noted that most freelance creative labor markets do not typically utilize formal, open hiring channels. Instead, the opportunities for recently arrived creative workers are available through casual recommendations, serendipitous meetings and the endorsement of peers (Merkel, 2018). While these informal peer connections provide significant opportunities for obtaining work, learning about the local music community and receiving assistance with various aspects of being a musician; they also create vulnerabilities. Opportunities for paid employment will depend upon building a relationship with others in the field, as well as being fortunate enough to find a position. This perspective helps us to understand how Shenzhen's informal live music scene provides opportunities for performance, instruction and collaboration to migrant musicians.

The most viable route for newly arrived musicians without a prior reputation in the area to find paid work in the music industry is through informal peer networks. Vita's first opportunity to perform for pay in Shenzhen was solely due to her contact in Yunnan; she had applied directly to more than 20 venues with zero success. Without her peer referral, she would be hard pressed to access the opportunity. Tim, while having developed extensive professional networks throughout Beijing, Shanghai, and Singapore, found that his professional network was not transferable into the local live music scene of Shenzhen. After Tim's planned music education program failed, he was forced to develop an entirely new set of local peer relationships from scratch in order to find teaching and performing opportunities. Both examples illustrate Merkel's concept of creative precarity: peer networks serve as gatekeepers to the scene and also provide migrants with the means to enter the scene, but also create instability for migrants (Merkel, 2018). Musicians who are unable to integrate themselves into local peer groups will find it difficult to maintain consistent income from

performing. However, this study provides a perspective that is not present in Merkel's work regarding Western co-working and freelance spaces: co-ethnic and co-migrant peer groups can be the initial and most dependable means for newly arrived internal migrant musicians to establish a first connection to otherwise inaccessible local creative communities.

Digital media

Ramayuda and other researchers point out that although digital platforms provide independent musicians with the opportunity to develop audiences beyond the traditional offline local music circuit, being popular on-line does not necessarily result in a stable paid creative labor position; therefore, digital legitimacy is still linked to the recognition of the offline scene and the relationship established in person with the industry, which leads to unequal results among the mobile creators (Ramayuda et al., 2025). Additionally, Gardiner adds that research regarding creative labor through platforms frequently divides into two different perspectives about digital media: platforms allow for less barriers to be removed for marginalized creators, and increase audience reaches; however, platforms can create similar conditions to the instability of income and precariousness for workers whose job relies on their visibility online (Gardiner, 2025). Based upon these findings, this study shows that digital platforms allow migrant musicians to gain access to a different form of visibility than their peers within their own community; however, the use of these platforms varies and, for the majority of the interviewed participants, is less important than peer-to-peer interactions for developing a legitimate local reputation.

Digital platforms provide a way for musicians to share recording and performance clips with people that may not be able to attend live performances in Shenzhen. On some occasions, the digital presence can lead to invitations for smaller performances or private lessons. However, based upon the interviews, digital media will not completely substitute reputation building through in person, peer validation. Vita posts short clips of her live singing online. She has posted many videos;

however, none of them have received a high number of views and she has never received any paid performance bookings from these videos. For Vita, digital media is simply providing additional exposure. Paid performance bookings are made based on in-person auditions and referrals from peers. Tim uses social media to promote his teaching and performance business. Social media provides Tim with a means of being found by prospective students. Yet venue operators and organizers in Shenzhen still prefer to make booking decisions based on mutual referrals and in-person auditions rather than relying on online portfolios.

Among all of the musicians interviewed, Jame was an exception when it comes to social media. Jame used to live and work in Beijing and he has been able to build a large online fan base by posting videos of his own music performances and educational tutorials. Jame uses social media as the primary source for finding gigs and teaching opportunities, and therefore does not rely on referrals from friends and colleagues who are living in Shenzhen. Jame's story illustrates that digital platforms provide migrant musicians with alternatives to securing paid employment within the creative industry. However, even though Jame's story is different from the other two musicians', the results of the research supported Ramayuda' and her research team's main point that digital visibility will never eliminate the precariousness of informal music work (Ramayuda et al., 2025). Although social media may increase the amount of people that hear about a musician, it cannot replace the importance of building face-to-face relationships with peers within the local community for many mobile musicians in Shenzhen.

Conclusion

This research indicates that when a musician relocates from his native city to a different one such as Shenzhen, he loses the geographic ties that had previously identified him as an artist and opened up job opportunities. However, relocation does not remove the musician's cultural or artistic knowledge obtained before relocating. On the contrary, relocating creates a new setting where the

musician can define and create his own sense of identity as an artist. Many musicians will establish their identity as artists based upon their dedication to music, instead of where they came from or their migratory status. Kenny and Lukianchenko and Parzer would agree with the above-mentioned findings. Migration eliminates established local artistic connections, but doesn't eliminate previous creative resources, and many artists continue to resist the geographic restrictions placed on them. The present research demonstrates that the informal peer network continues to serve as the main avenue for most migrant musicians in Shenzhen to obtain paid creative employment, acting as gatekeepers within precarious creative labor markets (Merkel, 2018). The digital medium serves as another way for most participants to gain visibility. Jame's experience exemplifies how digital platforms can become the main route for some individuals to find employment, and yet his experience was an exception rather than a rule among the interviewees (Ramayuda et al., 2025). The present research contributes to the scholarship on sonic mobility by studying internal migrant musicians in China, a group that has been studied less often in past research (Kielman, 2022).

However, there are several limitations to this study. The study was based on a relatively small number of participants and therefore, cannot be generalized to include all migrant musicians. There are many other factors in addition to geographic mobility that influence the ways in which artists can develop their creative career and establish their identity. Future studies using a larger sample size in multiple cities would be able to better examine the conditions that allow digital visibility to lead to sustained creative work. This additional sampling would also allow us to understand better what role the physical, place-based restrictions (which are often hard to define) have on the ways in which internal migrant musicians negotiate their identities in various urban environments.

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