

Taiwanese Indie Music: Charting The Growth of The New Wave

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Introduction

Though often little known to Westerners outside its reputation as a hub of global manufacturing or as the focal point of so-called US/Chinese new cold war rhetoric, typically overlooked in comparison to China, or regional neighbors Japan and South Korea, Taiwan is one of the foremost cultural powerhouses of East Asia. Taiwan's popular music is one of its most significant cultural exports. Despite slowly losing this status to China, the island nation has been the world's largest producer of Mandarin language pop music (Mandopop) since the 1980s: for decades most recorded Mandarin language music circulating in vastly larger Mainland China originated in Taiwan. Taiwanese music is enjoyed widely by the global Chinese diaspora, thus making it an integral part of both the East Asian and global music industries (Jian 2020, 215). Over the last twenty-odd years, Taiwan's music industry moved beyond earlier forms of sanitized singer-songwriter music and slick Mandarin vocal-pop, bringing independent, alternative, and Taiwanese language music into the fold, with the former categories essentially fully integrating into the mainstream in the past decade.

The current wave of indie music in Taiwan, which I have dubbed the "new wave," will be my particular focus. The new wave has emerged over the past five to ten years, composed of a throng of indie pop and rock bands that have appeared in quick succession since around 2010. They have enjoyed subcultural and mainstream acclaim in Taiwan as well as unprecedented success in penetrating international markets and indie music communities. This writing comes from the perspective of an English-speaking American, whose initial encounters with Taiwanese indie music came from streaming platforms and social media. As an outsider, this approach has an abundance of shortcomings, but is particularly valuable in understanding and measuring the success of Taiwan's efforts at internationally distributing its indie music, and the new, online environment it exists and is proliferated within. Through this framework, I will explore how this recent explosion of Taiwanese indie music came into being, how it is distinct from the mainstream Mandopop industry and the Taiwanese alternative scenes that preceded it, and explore where its future lies.

I argue that today's Taiwanese indie represents a new epoch of popular music on the island. The new wave has pushed Taiwanese indie to a point where it competes with the massive regional Mandopop industry and moved it beyond the Chinese diasporic and East Asian audiences it was previously sequestered to. This coincides with the global growth of independently released indie

pop and rock online, enabled by new artist-oriented music distribution platforms, and engendered by a unique set of national economic, political, and social conditions that have enabled it. As I shall discuss in a later section, these conditions have given the new wave of indie artists more target audiences and strategies for marketing themselves than ever and, in turn, new challenges.

The new wave is being led largely by young, savvy, globally-minded digital natives, influenced by Taiwan's now decades-long history of independent music, with many internationally educated in music production. It is through this amalgam of factors, in addition to the sheer determination and vision of a number of influential artists, that indie musicians in Taiwan have moved from a relatively marginal position to some of the country's foremost international cultural ambassadors.

In 2020, I visited Taipei and several other cities in the south of the country before leaving prematurely amidst uncertainty around the COVID-19 pandemic. During that time, I conducted a string of interviews with record store owners and, more recently via remote communication, spoke to some Taiwanese musicians and music community organizers currently residing in both Taiwan and the United States. In one conversation with Tang Shi-jie a.k.a. Trix, the proprietor of music, clothing, and art concept shop in Taipei called Waiting Room, he remarked on Taiwan's relative uneven development with other East Asian countries in the area of indie music:

“The music in Taiwan really started in the 90s. Before the 90s we had nothing. Because of the government issue, they blocked everything. There was a law to block everything – it was just like China, before. They blocked and censored music and books. At that time we didn't have anything. In the 90s, the government released [their grip] and we started to have a lot of music, pop music and singers, coming out. In Japan, it's a very different situation, because with Japan [global trends were always reaching them] at the same time. Even though the punk rock is from America or England, at that same time you would see a lot of punk bands [in Japan] in the [the 70s, 80s, and 90s] starting at the same time as they were in the West.¹”

Taiwan is a nation with a dense and complicated socio-political history, defined by an interplay between diverse, multi-ethnic groups of peoples, a legacy of colonialism, conflict with the People's Republic of China, and a national identity that is constantly being negotiated. Thus, the development of both mainstream commercial and indie music in Taiwan must be understood within this context. As Trix eluded to, the free and open distribution of diverse types of music did not occur in Taiwan until the suspension of martial law, in 1987. In recent years, as we will see, indie music has itself played a key role in the state and public's process of defining what it is to be Taiwanese in the 21st century.

¹ Trix (Tang Shi-jie), interview with the author, 20 March 2020.

I will begin here with an overview of the history of modern Taiwan before moving into the commercial recorded music industry and its intersections with a separate, but parallel underground scene, all of which laid the groundwork for contemporary indie music.

A Brief History of Taiwan

Taiwan, several hundred miles off the coast of southern China, is a densely populated country of almost 24 million. The island is about 14,000 square miles large and is ethnically Han Chinese majority. Uniquely, Taiwan is home to one of the most diverse populations of native Austronesians in the world, who have collectively inhabited the island for thousands of years. A number of national languages are spoken including Taiwanese Mandarin, Taiwanese Hokkien (the second most widely spoken language, usually simply referred to as Taiwanese), Hakka, and a number of aboriginal languages and dialects. When referring to the Taiwanese language, I will use the term “Taiyu,” following the precedent set by the authors of *Made In Taiwan: Studies in Popular Music*, whose authoritative work I will be citing extensively: “To avoid confusion with cultural or national identity, we decide to use ‘Taiyu’ instead of ‘Taiwanese’...to reflect how the language is commonly used in Taiwanese society today as well as to avoid the implication that the many other languages spoken in the country are in some way, not ‘Taiwanese’” (Tsai et al. 2020, 2).

Much of the island’s early modern history (from about the 17th century on) can be understood as a series of long-spanning conflicts between various groups of Aboriginal peoples, settlers from the Fujian region of China, and various occupying Chinese and European colonial forces. The notion of a distinct, Taiwanese national identity was first articulated during the island’s period of Japanese occupation, “associated with the possibility of self-determination, animated by international socialist and Marxist movements” (Tsai et al. 2020, 2). The Japanese controlled Taiwan from 1895 to 1945 and, after their defeat in World War II, they ceded control of Taiwan to Chinese Nationalist forces, led by Chiang Kai-Shek’s Kuomintang (KMT) party. After the KMT’s defeat in the Chinese Civil War at the hands of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949, the Nationalists fled to Taiwan, christening it to the new Republic of China, bringing with them millions of mainland Han Chinese. From 1949 to 1987, the KMT ruled the island with an iron fist: they swiftly attempted to eradicate all Japanese and Communist influence, violently crushed popular uprisings, and systematically suppressed native culture and Taiyu language, while attempting to shape the island according to their interests. The legacy of “the White Terror” under the KMT’s reign, and the harsh Japanese government before them, have had a profound traumatic impact on the people of Taiwan; this trauma was unable to be fully reckoned with and publicly unpacked through art, media, and music until the country’s liberalization decades later.

Today, depending on who you ask, Taiwan (officially, the Republic of China or ROC) is either a diverse, multi-ethnic, sovereign liberal democracy or a semi-autonomous arm of the People's Republic of China (PRC) that is culturally and historically, above all else, Chinese. The PRC has never recognized the Chinese Civil War as having officially ended and therefore views the ROC government as illegitimate: the official CCP party line is that "reunification" is inevitable and non-negotiable. Threats of PRC encroachment are both existential and material: a constant stream of harsh political rhetoric, the recent crushing of the democracy movement in Hong Kong, and military shows of force (such as the regular flight of Chinese fighter jets over Taiwanese airspace). There is, thus an inescapable, underlying political anxiety and sense of precarity that undergirds life in Taiwan, with this issue standing out as one of the island's most defining concerns.

For decades, the KMT government firmly resisted the push for subsumption into the PRC, in favor of its own political vision of a single unified Republic of China. Over the years, however, the ROC's loss of UN recognition, the growth of its economy, and "world events in the mid-1980s leading to the liberalization and democratization of authoritarian regimes," all had a profound effect on the country and the KMT government (Brown 2004, 63). By the late 1980s, the mission to forcefully mold Taiwan into a Chinese national state began to crumble. In 1987, then-President Chiang Ching-kuo lifted the martial law that had been in place since the KMT occupation began. Though the island was still not a free and open democracy, and political opposition remained in minority, this was a decisive shift of power in favor of the Taiwanese people that can be viewed as pivotal in the island's initial "opening up." "In the post-authoritarian, post-martial-law era (1987-), the ruling [KMT] party legitimized the coexistence of 'Chinese' and 'Taiwanese' [identities] in its attempt to 'go native' or become a bonafide, non-foreign 'local' regime" (Tsai et al. 2020, 2).

In this new political climate, public calls for Taiwanese sovereignty were recognized on an unprecedented scale and as the Democratic People's Party (DPP) gained power (today it is the majority party), the notion of Taiwan as a unique, self-determined state began to become part and parcel of the official government stance. And it was under this backdrop of economic and social liberalization that the public and private sectors flourished, and massive social reforms were enacted. Alternative music, in the form of the "New Music" or "New Taiwanese Song" movements (which I will elaborate on shortly), came out of these conditions, with many key players eventually absorbed into the indie music scene that emerged in the late 90s and exploded in the early 2000s.

In summary, it is worth considering the following as the key socio-political and historical elements of the rise of Taiwanese indie music: (1) the interplay between various groups of Aboriginal, Japanese, and Chinese peoples on the island; (2) the history of occupying regimes in

the 20th century (both their repressive practices and development of the island's modern culture and economy), culminating in the ROC government; (3) the suspension of martial law, the subsequent "opening-up" of Taiwan's economy and political life, its entrance into the global neoliberal order, and the ongoing cause of self-determination. These factors all play a decisive role in the musical styles, languages, attitudes, and politics found in modern Taiwanese music.

Early 20th Century Taiwanese Popular Music & Western Influence

At the dawn of the global recorded music industry, engendered by technological developments such as the phonograph record, Taiwan was under Japanese rule. "To compete with Western imperial powers, Japan worked the human and natural resources of Taiwan to systematically develop the colony's infrastructure, education system, and industry" (Tsai et al. 2020, 2). This quickly modernized the island, giving way to cultural industry, and a new market for recorded music. "While Taiwan was initially regarded as an overseas market for the Japanese record industry, in the 1930s there emerged a booming and quickly professionalizing record industry geared toward the recording of local Taiwanese sounds for the modern tastes of young people" (Tsai et al. 2020, 2). Japanese record companies gained foreign investment from British and American entities, entered merger deals with foreign labels, and recorded hundreds of Taiyu songs in Japan for import back into Taiwan. By the 1950s and 60s, with the ROC government in place, the American presence in Taiwan increased as they developed strategic ties in opposition to the Communist PRC and became involved in the Korean Civil War and later, Vietnam War. The influx of American troops brought a new wave of Anglo-American influences that began to penetrate popular music, with Western styles such as rock and R&B imported to cater to GIs. Local devotees of this music formed rock clubs and fueled a booming pirate record industry. However, unlike other post-war American allies such as Japan and South Korea, the dissemination of popular music and the development of youth culture around it faced specific hurdles.

While Anglo rock and folk music permeated Taiwan through military imperialism, as it had elsewhere, radio DJs played mostly chart-topping Western songs and local bands performed covers of popular radio hits rather than original compositions, quite simply because there was more money to be made there (Ho 2020, 25). Consequently, the early subcultures around Western styles of music did not take on a distinct non-commercial or political character. And while Anglo-influenced rock and folk music indeed reached a country like Japan in very much the same way, Japan enjoyed a much larger free flow of information, more Western capital, and a relatively less restrictive political environment. One such possibility then, is that robust underground and indie music scenes have flourished in Japan for so much longer because Western styles have had decades longer to "freely" incubate, mutate, and "authentically" fuse with local styles and sensibilities.

There was no room for political critique in Taiwanese music at this time, as it was subject to censorship and language policies. Taiyu music was still in demand and being recorded to a limited extent, but it was heavily suppressed by the KMT who viewed Taiyu song as culturally inferior and politically threatening: “In 1948, the KMT began penalizing the use of non-Mandarin languages in schools and other public spaces,” and deliberately prioritized Mandarin and English language broadcasts; by the 1970s “the KMT did away with the structures that facilitated the circulation of Taiyu popular music” (Tsai et al. 2020, 6).

In the mid-1970s, young intellectuals, influenced by burgeoning Taiwanese nativist sentiment, created “campus folk songs,” that fused touches of traditional Chinese instrumentation and aboriginal music traditions with the American folk-rock and protest songs of the 60s and 70s. Though possessing a political charge in their original student context, the movement was quickly subject to corporate co-opting, and most recordings played by radio DJs were commercial-friendly: the dreamy Westernized soft rock fell in line with the KMT’s standards for acceptable content. While these songs proliferated within the confines of Taiwan’s major commercial record companies, there existed “unassimilated campus folk songs,” which provided an outlet for artists who sought avenues of free expression, criticizing the KMT regime and its cultural hegemony (Tsai et al. 2020, 7). Examples include Kao Tzu-yang, who was arrested and imprisoned for two years after performing her 1973 song “We Are Family,” “in an attempt to begin a small cooperative credit group within Aboriginal communities” and Tang Tsu-chuen, whose experimental folk song album, inspired by “culturally pluralistic” Taiwanese influences was censored upon its release in 1978 (Tsai et al. 2020, 7-8). The unassimilated folk songs are in many ways the ideological and aesthetic precursors to Taiwan’s “New Song Movement.”

The Birth of Taiwanese Alternative

While popular dissent and avant-garde artists bubbled up in the underground, 1987 marked the year they could finally rise to the surface in Taiwan. Following the suspension of military occupation, the Democratic Progressive Party was permitted to hold public office and for the first time, the state and political landscape at large began to openly acknowledge and flirt with nativist sentiment. “The New Taiwanese Song Movement,” was a product of this era, informed by a confluence of left-wing political activism, a wider embrace of Taiyu language, Aboriginal song, and the indie rock, hip-hop, punk, and alternative music coming out of Western countries like the United States and the United Kingdom.

Led by UFO Records as well as Crystal Records and its subsidiaries, Rock Records and Mandala Records, “new music” “pursued the musical meditation of critical social issues such as class, race, gender, and economic inequalities,” and “reached for a non-exclusive construction of ethnic identity” (Tsai et al. 2020, 9). Blacklist Studio’s 1989 album *Mad Songs* exemplifies this to a tee. The band combined Mandarin and Taiyu lyrics, fusing contemporary international popular music

trends like rapping and synthesizers, with Aboriginal melodies and traditional, Japanese enka style vocals. It makes heavy use of drum machines, live guitar and bass, and, at times, leftfield sampling. In their lyrics and through statements in their record packaging and liner notes, Blacklist Studio overtly challenged the KMT's cultural hegemony and language policy through songs that were experimental, bold, and unlike anything else that had been released in the country prior. Their musicianship was as incisive as their political critique on this record, featuring virtuosic studio compositions, spoken word, and the, at times quite humorous, integration of field recordings. Track six, "Jìchéngchē (Taxi)," is my personal favorite cut from the LP: an off-kilter, New Wave inspired, synthpop song that blends a part-Taiyu part-Mandarin rap vocal with a shouted argument between a taxi driver and passenger into the song's introduction, instrumental breakdowns, and chorus, creating a call and response effect. It is immediately followed by "Mínzhǔ Ācǎo (Democracy Bumpkin)," which opens and closes with a sample of the ROC's national anthem. After that intro sample, the song moves into a drum machine backing track, metallic electric guitar noodling, and a pensive string sample, flanked by a quick succession of claps. Sitting atop all this is a shouted rap, giving the track the thrust and feel of an army marching band procession, no doubt a reference to the subject matter. Lyrically, as the title suggests, it is an uncompromising critique of the KMT regime, sketching out a confrontation between military forces and citizens. The first verse imagines a sarcastic conversation between two men living under occupation: "Let's ask Mr Policeman; Are you going to counterattack the mainland and prepare for war?" Later in the track, a fierce refrain of "Wǒ yào kàngyì" is repeated: "I want to protest!" Such explicit commentary in a studio album would have been unthinkable just a few years prior.

In the economic sector, Taiwan's opening up also brought domestic market reforms, and the consolidation and internationalization of the music industry with, "a new kind of Mandarin popular music [becoming] recognized as a commodity with particular economic and aesthetic values; it gained legitimacy from the market, the educated middle class, and even intellectuals" (Tsai et al. 2020, 8). By the early 90s, major record labels such as Sony, BMG, Warner, EMI, and Polygram had established Taiwanese subsidiaries, "from which time it had become the centre of the Chinese language pop market" (Ho 2006, 138). This era marked the integration of Taiwan into the modern international music industry and the establishment of "symbolic relations between the three Chinese communities" within the entertainment industry, namely Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China (Ho 2006, 138). The global Mandopop industry began to flourish under these conditions, but by and large, tended to formulaically prescribe sanitized styles, leaving little room for experimentation. As the decade progressed though, this began to change, with international trends and Taiyu music beginning to carve out their own space in the commercial environment.

While underground alternative music continued to flourish in its separate, but parallel space through the 1990s, the latter half of the decade saw a new influx of government policy that began to push it into the mainstream, laying the foundation for the explosion of modern Taiwanese indie.

The Late 90s & Into the Millennium: Indie's First Wave

Despite the growth of the Mandopop industry through the 90s, towards the end of the decade, the commercial music industry, on the whole, was declining, as it was elsewhere in the world, thanks to the rise of Internet file-sharing. This, coupled with the economic rise of China and its own rival Mandopop industry in the 90s, put pressure on the Taiwanese government. These factors increased the central government's desire to solidify its national identity and in turn define Taiwan's "national music." When we consider this timeline in a global context, Taiwan, as discussed previously, had a "late start" compared to some of its more powerful East Asian neighbors.

In the 1960s and 70s, while Taiwan was still in the midst of repressive military dictatorship, a wave of newly independent countries around the world began to consider how to promote and fund the arts through the lens of national identity. Roger Wallis writes:

In the wake of the emergence of...new independent countries around 1960, the young governments were faced with problems concerning how they should relate to phenomena in the cultural sector...around 1970 governments started to formulate more comprehensive cultural policies which led to an abundance of decisions affecting cultural decisions that decade...thus the Seventies could be termed of the breakthrough of national cultural policies.²

As I have discussed, the KMT government made any promotion of national culture vis-a-vis "Taiwan" as a sovereign entity impossible; they instead opted for the project of redefining colonized territory as strictly "Chinese," with a select number of Western or American influences allowed to permeate where they saw fit. Thus, the breakthrough decade of national cultural policies was the 1990s for Taiwan. The idea of Taiwanese "national popular music," was broadly understood as being defined by Mandopop and domestic commercial trends, "shaped through interaction between internationally distributed popular music and local types of music" (Wallis 1984, 235). But in the mid-to late 1990s, the central government began to recognize the new strains of popular music and actively acknowledge previously marginalized aboriginal styles: they attempted to synthesize overlooked aspects of the broader culture into something resembling a unified, "marketable" national cultural identity. This led to the introduction of

² Wallis 1984, 233

cultural policy reforms modeled closely on the New British Labour party's "Cool Britannia" campaign, which embraced and co-opted the subversive appeal of Brit Pop in an effort to "brand" the country at home and abroad (Lin; Tsai 2020, 172). The Taiwanese government's policies allocated money for domestic music festivals and events and specifically targeted indie musicians. These new conditions thrust a handful of alternative musicians into the mainstream for the first time.

Mayday, far and away from Taiwan's most popular rock band, released their first album, titled simply *Mayday's First Album*, in 1999 on Rock Records. The five-piece could, at this time, best be described as an edgy-boy band: they had a fairly straightforward pop alt-rock sound and many of their music videos played out like lighthearted teenage dramas. Not to be understated, however, the sound resonated strongly with the public and by 2004, they were touring internationally to millions of fans at sold-out stadium shows in Asia and the United States. In 2012, they sold out China's 100,000 capacity Bird's Nest stadium, by 2014 had started their own label and, between 2017 and 2019, put on world tours that rivaled the attendance figures of Taylor Swift, Ed Sheeran, and BTS (Jian 2020, 215–217). As their sound progressed through the years, Mayday came to redefine what many thought of as Mandopop, "crossing over" from the underground while retaining some of their indie effect and sound. While "the Taiwanese Beatles," as they've come to be nicknamed, got their humble start playing alongside boundary-pushing underground acts in the emerging festival circuit, few of those artists would "cross over" in the same way or even come close to touching the band's success or international reach. However, some of those contemporaries did make waves in their own right.

Six-piece rock group The Chairmen, formed in 1999. Their debut single from that year "Lǒng mèi dǎi shì" ("Arrogant") was ranked one of the top ten singles of the year by the Chinese Musicians Exchange Association (an organization formed in Taiwan in 1993 to promote the growth of independent music) and was later nominated for several Golden Melody Awards (Taiwan's equivalent of the Grammys.) Notable is the band's strong embrace of traditional Taiwanese culture: their live performances feature aboriginal dancers and costuming, and they make extensive use of Hokkien language and song.

Another group, Sticky Rice, is a stand out among this first wave of successful indie artists, debuting with their 2000 LP *The Bird King*. Something of a funkier, spiritual successor to Blacklist Studio, Sticky Rice seamlessly synthesized a number of global popular music genres: 90s alt-rock, G-Funk, and third-wave ska, with plenty of callbacks to 70s disco and boogie thrown in, all tinged with a modern Mandopop flavor and a splash of English language vocals. That the album was released at the dawn of the new millennium is incredibly fitting: it instrumentally references and directly reflects on the history of 20th-century popular music in Taiwan, namely its many intersections with Western pop. The third track on *The Bird King*,

“Funky People,” is the English language cut with the vocoded refrain, “we are funky people, with the funky soul” laid over fast-paced P-Funk style breakbeats. As the track progresses, the band shouts out Kool and the Gang, KC & The Sunshine Band, James Brown, and Average White Band by name, all of which would have no doubt been on the airways of their youth or found within any respectable collection of pirate records. The “shout out homage” approach was a staple of 90s hip-hop breakdowns and outros and even brings to mind tracks like Daft Punk’s “Teachers” (1997). The song’s chorus reads like a medley of memorable refrains from John Lennon and The Cars:

*Imagine all the people dancing on the rainbow
So you can feel the joy and let the good times roll
You never did before*

These artists had caught the attention of the broader industry in part thanks to the rise of the music festival: Formoz Festival “broke” both Sticky Rice and Mayday and their appearances at the 1999 Spring Scream festival had a large hand in their subsequent record deals. Formoz Festival, now one of Taiwan’s biggest international music festivals, held its first event in 1995 with just ten bands. Spring Scream, created by two American ex-pats from Washington state, was formed the same year and also continues to run annually to this day. The two were each extremely influential and inspired dozens of others of similar festivals which began to crop up with increasing frequency in the years that followed.

I spoke with Thomas Hu about this subject and the history of modern Taiwanese indie at large. Thomas is a horn player and vocalist who has been active in Taiwan’s indie music scene since 2001. He’s the leader of a successful ska group, Skaraoke, which formed in 2008, but he’s played in dozens of bands over the years, including Sticky Rice. He attributes the initial explosion of indie music around the millennium to the appearance of these music festivals.

“There were always underground bands, but then with the start of Spring Scream, that helped jumpstart the indie scene in my opinion...Each year, they would have all the bands register and then eventually it became 200 bands and six stages and it became a huge thing....And then there were a lot of piggyback events, [with] spring break there would be festivals everywhere. So people realized ”ok there is a festival where bands can go and interact with each other, we can make friends and watch each other's shows. I would attribute the growth to Spring Scream in particular.”³

³ Thomas Hu, interview with the author, 16 April 2021

Thanks to the success of these policies, as well as an increased appetite for festivals amongst musicians and the general public, the Western style of the multi-band, multi-stage music festival, was embraced by the indie music community, quickly became a fixture of the Taiwanese culture industry, and is now a common leisure activity and tourist attraction. Between 2000 and 2015, the number of music festivals on the island jumped from just four to more than 20 (Jian 2018, 2–3). The summer Hohaiyan rock festival just outside of northern Taipei drew a crowd of 800,000 in 2012 and 1 million in 2013 (Ter 2013).

In the same window, live houses, the local term for venues, began to crop up as well, many in the Taipei area, in proximity to colleges like National Taiwan University. Today, they play a similar, if not more vital role in the contemporary indie scene, frequented by local students and young people. Live houses in Taipei such as The Wall and Legacy host local and touring bands most nights of the week, as do a few others concentrated in and around Huashan 1914 Creative Park, one of several designated art spaces sponsored by the local government which also features exhibitions, eateries, and small businesses. The city is also home to Revolver, a bar and hard rock-oriented live house. Dozens of other live houses, catering to underground acts can be found across the country.

Indie Comes Into Its Own: The Second Wave

A wave of singer-songwriters, many of whom started as pub performers or university musicians, were snapped up by Rock Records and similar labels who scouted upstart, indie talent at the turn of the millennium. The “Little Fresh” movement, as it’s come to be known, was populated by artists such as Cheer Chen and Soda Green, who had been active since the late 90s, but began to pick up steam when they were marketed heavily in the mid-2000s. Chen’s early albums, like her 1998 debut *Think Twice* or 2002’s *Groupies* pivot between delicate, romantic, acoustic ballads and spunky, swirling, reverb loaded alt-rock tracks, bringing to mind The Cure or The Cranberries. By and large, though, this was “coffee shop indie,” ripe to be swooped up and broadcast through tinny speakers in urban centers. Artists like this charted well, cleaned up their sound, and quickly became a part of the commercial Mandopop rank and file.

Meanwhile, the mid-aughts to the early 2010s was an important era for Taiwan’s underground, where bands, like elsewhere in the world, began to seek and form communities online, via message boards, early social media, and the blogosphere.

Touming Magazine is a strong representative of the early online era and an example of a band that took a DIY approach to international distribution. The band was active from 2007 to 2016 and included drummer Tang “Trix” Shi-ije, the aforementioned owner of Waiting Room, and lead guitar/vocalist Hom Shen-hao, now the proprietor of the PAR Store concept shop in Taipei

and the lead of a new project, VOOID. The alt-rock group channeled the high octane sound of hardcore punk and American emo and is remembered fondly for fierce live performances and cult LPs like the 2010s OUR SOUL MUSIC. Their punk sensibility informed the creation of Chngin Records, the label they created to distribute and market their own recordings, modeled after DC hardcore pioneers Fugazi and their Dischord label (Jian 2020, 219). Using their blog and BBS message boards, they formed close bonds with Japanese punk bands and organized small cooperative gigs (Jian 2020, 219).

In retrospect, the band's heyday, (from their formation to around 2012 or so, when they released their final EP TOUMING MAGAZINE FOREVER), can be viewed as a transitional period for Taiwanese underground music. Their tactics helped put Taiwanese indie rock on the map in Japan, where it now has a stronghold and introduced young musicians to sharing their music and engaging with wider communities in a way that had no comparable precedent. However, as public funding for indie music continued to expand and a new generation of bands appeared, this approach became somewhat outmoded.

After the initial successes with festivals and the disbursement of funding for larger, commercially successful "indie" acts like Mayday, the Democratic Progressive Party sought to "market" Taiwan abroad and affirm its burgeoning national identity on the world stage using indie musicians as cultural ambassadors. To do this, they began funding their participation in international music festivals. Taiwan's Ministry of Culture first envisioned these funding schemes in 2002, when the DPP introduced "Challenging 2008: Six-Year National Development Plan," which sought to revitalize Taiwan's audiovisual industries (Lin; Tsai 2020, 171). While just one artist was subsidized for performance abroad in 2009, this jumped to 69 in 2011 (Lin; Tsai 2020, 175). From around 2010 onward, as these policies were beginning to see increased implementation, government bodies began to outsource and directly fund domestic production companies to orchestrate events at home and abroad. Rather than relying on carefully crafted, DIY social networks to break into scenes overseas, this new pathway simply required artists to "get in" with these domestic production companies and/or apply for a grant to get added to a festival or event bill.

In 2007, the central government began subsidizing the recording of indie bands and in 2010, this further expanded into the Popular Music Development Action plan overseen by the new Bureau of Audiovisual and Music Industry Development (BAMID). Now, in addition to applying for grants for performing abroad, artists could obtain grants for the production and marketing of albums. The idea of finding success as an indie band was no longer a pipe dream, but a viable, self-sustaining, and potentially lucrative path forward.

Current Era: The Formation of Taiwanese Indie's New Wave

Over the last ten years, Taiwanese indie has come into its own by utilizing a combination of public funding, new modes of networking, and the self-directed distribution afforded by online infrastructure. In 2009, there were approximately 500 to 600 indie bands in Taiwan. In 2013, that figure increased to 1500 and has continued to grow (Lin; Tsai, 174). What I've dubbed the "new wave" can be understood as the large group of successful artists that exists in a separate system, running mostly parallel to the commercial Mandopop industry. New wave indie artists have achieved widespread notoriety in the wider culture in Taiwan as well as an unprecedented level of organic integration into the contemporary global indie scene. Indie artists active in Taiwan today represent dozens of different genres, but the new wave is dominated by lo-fi rock, synthpop, R&B, and hip-hop influenced music. Over the past five odd years, write-ups about Taiwanese bands and the scene at large have begun to appear on Western music outlets such as Bandcamp, Mic, and Vice's Noisey. In addition to seamlessly coexisting within other international indie communities, indie in Taiwan has become a national phenomenon that has arguably superseded mainstream commercial Mandopop in its cultural relevance, particularly amongst young people.

In previous sections, I have introduced a handful of artists, movements, and public policy developments that led up to the new wave of Taiwanese indie. Here, I will delve into some additional systemic factors that have enabled this recent growth and then go on to examine some related concerns raised by individuals active in the scene.

YouTube, Bandcamp, and Soundcloud represent a massive shift from comparably ineffectual methods of distributing music online such as the blogosphere or file sharing sites. These extremely accessible and widely used channels have enabled artists in Taiwan and around the world to record music at home and share it instantly with global audiences. Streaming services such as Spotify are especially key in acquiring global reach: Taiwanese artists frequently have tracks placed on user-created or staff curated playlists, an easy source of large overseas exposure (and some revenue.) While these platforms have been especially important in spreading Taiwanese indie to global audiences, the country's world-class tech sector has also produced a number of similar, localized services over the past 15 years that have concentrated and streamlined event coordination and online distribution.

KKBOX is a music streaming platform that was created in Taipei in 2004, predating Spotify by one year (it wasn't introduced to Taiwan until 2013.) It has a particularly extensive Mandopop library and targets a handful of other East Asian markets such as Japan, Hong Kong, Macau,

Malaysia, and Singapore, boasting over 10 million active users.⁴ In 2006, it began hosting its own music awards ceremony, which recently pivoted to a full on music festival.

StreetVoice is a popular service tailored specifically to indie music. Like the name implies, it targets the “street level,” with a model that focuses on showcasing fledgling artists. Bandcamp might be its closest Western analog, but it has no true equivalent. Part streaming service, part social media, it allows musicians to upload their tracks and users to rate, like, and comment on them, data which is used to generate sitewide leaderboards ranking new music. It is integrated directly into Facebook and Instagram, rewarding highly ranked artists with an extra push into major social media algorithms. Like KKBOX or Spotify, editors curate playlists and select a “song of the day,” which is highlighted along with album releases on the site's landing. StreetVoice has come to play an important role in local event organizing, serving as an aggregate of listings for local shows and events. Platforms like StreetVoice reveal the uniquely localized quality of Taiwanese indie music: it is a tight knit community.

In addition to being empowered by innovations in home recording technology and this new online infrastructure, more young people than ever are studying music production abroad. Students gain expertise in music engineering, recording, and marketing in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere, eventually returning to Taiwan with specialized knowledge that has revamped domestic infrastructure. This trend was a gradual process, enabled by the new political and economic developments in the decades following modernization, but has become more common in recent years. Thomas Hu mentioned this in our discussion of the indie new wave:

“...You know a lot of people went to go abroad to study music, study recording and study all kinds of music industry business. Back in the nineties, that's when I was going to school, there was no digital music yet. So I had not learned to record music. I mean, there was music recording, but it was all analog. I wasn't performance, so I didn't know anything about recording, that's like a different realm.”⁵

These factors have all made it easier than ever for independent artists in Taiwan to carve out a career as musicians, whether they engage with the larger, private commercial music industry, public funding schemes, self-publish their music, or, most likely, an amalgam of all or multiple of these.

Breaking Out: The New Wave Abroad

No Party for Cao Dong, a bit like Mayday before them, is the Taiwanese indie new wave's biggest commercial success story. The grungy, post-rock outfit pivots between the heavy,

⁴ <https://kkboxcorp.com/>

⁵ Thomas Hu, interview with the author, 16 April 2021

melodic soundscapes characteristic of the genre and a funky, dance-rock sound akin to Vampire Weekend or LCD Soundsystem. However, unlike Mayday and other large acts with underground origins, No Party for Cao Dong managed their own distribution and booked their own global tours. The band's self-released 2015 EP, distributed on homemade CDRs, were snapped up almost instantly and their 2016 debut, *The Servile*, sold over 30,000 copies at a record pace. "The rise of No Party for Cao Dong proved that Taiwan's indie music had the power to compete with the mainstream record industry" (Jian 2020, 216–217).

No Party For Cao Dong has targeted primarily Chinese and domestic Taiwanese audiences, much like the mainstream Mandopop industry. Their highest grossing and most attended tour destinations were all in China. Elsewhere, the band relied on the Chinese and Taiwanese diaspora to fill seats, opting not to market to local audiences or book local openers (Jian 2020, 217). This approach can ensure Taiwanese bands touring abroad have well-attended shows, but isolates them from non-Chinese speaking, local audiences.

Sunset Rollercoaster has opted for another approach. The indie sextet is the aspirational example of a Taiwanese band coming up in the domestic underground scene looking to organically integrate themselves into the fabric of Western and global indie scenes.

The band's 2011 debut album, *Bossa Nova*, was largely a straightforward folk-rock project, with some heavy, punk-leaning cuts thrown in. After a five year hiatus, they returned with their 2016 *Jinji Kikko* EP, revamping their sound: the band embraced a polished, retro, synth-led, adult-oriented rock sound. On their most recent album, 2020's *SOFT STORM* (the name a reference to an 80s soft rock / R&B trend dubbed "quiet storm" by radio DJs) the band leaned into the retro pop canon even further, collaborating with cult 70s AOR singer-songwriter Ned Doheny, who offered to produce their album and play a mentor role after an encounter with the band in California in 2019.

Like No Party for Cao Dong, they have self-released all of their recordings and also have established their own production company to manage tours and coordinate events. But whereas the soundscapes of Cao Dong's post-rock grandiosity lends itself to arena crowds, Sunset Rollercoaster reflects the new wave's DIY, live house sector: aesthetically, they hold an archetypal position in the lo-fi rock and dream pop saturated underground. Thus, they have led the way for many of the most prominent underground indie acts in Taiwan today with both their approach and style: bands such as Everfor, South Bad Boy, The Fur, and Deca Joins among dozens if not hundreds of others. The Rollercoasters and their contemporaries reflect the style of Western indie heavyweights such as Mac Demarco, Men I Trust, Homeshake, or Mild High Club; Western listeners on YouTube or Spotify listening to such artists are likely to be algorithmically directed to the Rollercoasters and related Taiwanese bands. Keeping this in mind, it is unsurprising that they would play well to and specifically target Western audiences.

Another crucial element separating groups like Sunset Rollercoaster from groups like No Party For Cao Dong, is the fact that they write songs exclusively in English. I asked Sunset Rollercoaster's North American tour manager, Mia Min Yen, about the band's reception in the States. Mia helped secure the band their first gigs in the US and landed them a headlining slot at the annual music festival she curates for Summer Stage in New York's Central Park, Taiwanese Waves.

*"...When they started playing – people were so amazed. "Wait, that's a band from Taiwan," you know they thought it was six white boys playing. But when they look up on stage and it's Asian dudes playing music. So I think seeing them play was the first time I realized "Oh I think it's possible for Asian bands to make a presence in the states." Obviously, it has to start with music that's familiar: it's in English, or the genre, indie rock."*⁶

At age 18, Mia came to New York to study Communications at the New School and had multiple internships with local venues throughout her undergrad. While pursuing her Master's at the New School, she interned for Summer Stage and pitched the idea of a Taiwan-centric festival. Initially, she failed to drum up enthusiasm for the proposal, but in 2016, she finally got the go-ahead, and has held the festival every summer since.

In the early 2010s, when Mia was in high school, she frequently attended gigs at live houses, and would bring herself up to speed on the latest artists during her summer vacations in between semesters in her undergrad. Taiwanese Waves was thus born out of Mia's desire to utilize her web of connections and relationships to indie bands back in Taiwan, give them an opportunity to perform abroad, and introduce New Yorkers to the scene's cutting edge acts. But this meant showcasing not only "Western friendly" artists like the Rollercoasters, but curating festivals that serve as a cross section of Taiwan's cultural diversity.

I would say only in the last decade more people are using different languages or dialects that are used in Taiwan to do songwriting, for example Hakka...and a lot of tribal languages as well. I think...because of the history of the island a lot of people are used to hearing different dialects, so when the songs are out, I don't find it strange, I just really appreciate the music, and I wanted to learn more about what the lyrics are about. So putting that in my showcase, I wanted to bring not only just Mandarin singer-songwriters. I brought Hakka performance and indigenous performance to Taiwanese Waves too because you know, to me, music – if it's good music people will like it, it doesn't matter what they sing about. You just catch the melody.⁷

⁶ Mia Min Yen (Yan Min), interview with the author, 6 April 2021

⁷ Mia Min Yen (Yan Min), interview with the author, 6 April 2021

While for some Taiwanese artists, the language they perform in is a reflexive or unconscious choice, for others, it is a deliberate calculation that can make or break them in certain markets. The main barrier to entry for any East Asian indie band seeking an audience outside of their community is language. For Western artists, the scales are also often disproportionately tipped in their favor: English speaking artists seeking an international audience have the privilege of their language being a global standard, found across the world in popular culture, advertising, infrastructure etc. Western and more specifically American global cultural hegemony means that many anglophone bands looking to break into overseas markets don't have to consider language to the same extent. For Taiwanese bands though, the issue is multifaceted. On one hand, bands focused on marketing abroad primarily through government channels may find that the use of Mandarin, or even Taiyu language, makes them more appealing as cultural ambassadors. Thomas Hu remarked on the downside of this: the delicate balancing act he has felt he must play in order to curry the favor of the MOC and public-private touring agencies.

The [officials] have to decide, okay, well, is your music promoting Taiwanese values? You know, so maybe my Western upbringing and my Ska music is not really Taiwanese music. But I do write songs in Mandarin. I do talk about the culture here through my songs... I think with the pro independence party, the DPP, they've been pushing really strong Taiwanese values and they want to promote the culture. So they're much more willing to fund bands who sing in Taiwanese or who are very local, you know? So with my kind of Western style, I haven't been able to break into that scene, [even though] I've been around for a while.⁸

Whereas Taiyu music was once a gesture of protest in a sense, a challenge to the hegemonic Mandarin language policy and system, the liberal progressive government and more specifically, the Ministry of Culture, has attempted to bring it into the fold. While for Mia, hosting Taiyu language artists was an instinctual decision, indie bands who produce Taiyu language music are often targeted by the MOC for their “national character.” But while being an artist that outwardly displays Taiwanese culture can be helpful for those trying to make it in the festival circuit, it can limit their target audiences and commercial success almost exclusively to the domestic sphere.

Sunset Rollercoaster, meanwhile, are enabled primarily by their independently cultivated connections and are therefore unconcerned with falling in line with the MOC's standards. And as previously mentioned, the band has deliberately chosen to pursue producing English language to break into Western markets and DIY communities. In Miaoju Jian's article, “Taiwanese Indie Music,” she quotes the band as saying:

⁸ Thomas Hu, interview with the author, 16 April 2021

“I don’t think everybody should throw their efforts into this, because it’s too exhausting. If you really want to sing Chinese songs, your target audience is the same as Mandopop’s; doing that makes complete sense. As for Sunset Rollercoaster, because we sing in English, we’re more of a special case. We have to get to know the industry, the promoters, and only then will we understand how to approach it, how to publicize ourselves, how to get a return on our investment.”⁹

The approach has been wildly successful. The band’s breakout moment in the US was their appearance on Audiotree Live, a platform that specializes in showcasing live video performances from up and coming musicians from around the world. Their 2018 Audiotree Live session has been streamed over 500,000 times on YouTube, exposing them directly to the platform’s predominantly Western audience. Mia revealed that while the band met “with a lot of labels...in 2019,” including esteemed indie labels like Ninja Tune and Stone’s Throw, “Sunset Music is [now] its own label and we are signing other artists” (Mia Min Yen (Yan Min), interview with the author, 6 April 2021).

It’s worth considering another one of the most successful Taiwanese underground acts here, the math rock trio Elephant Gym. Like Sunset Rollercoaster, they also performed on AudioTree Live (their 2019 performance has racked up nearly 1 million hits) and Mia also manages the band’s tours in the States. Though their fanbase likely differs some from the indie pop devotees that follow the Rollercoasters and similar artists, they have carved out a strong niche for themselves in the US, currently sitting among Bandcamp’s all time best selling math rock bands.¹⁰ Since their music is entirely instrumental, the primary barrier to entry for non-Taiwanese or non-Chinese speaking audiences is removed. They caught the attention of San Diego based Topshelf Records, (whose roster boasts American alt and emo favorites like Sorority Noise and The World Is a Beautiful Place & I Am No Longer Afraid to Die) signing with them for US distribution in 2018. Mia has featured them at Taiwanese Waves as well: “In the third year, I found that math rock was another big thing. I invited Elephant Gym to play and they brought a lot of non-Asian audience. They already had a strong following” (Mia Min Yen (Yan Min), interview with the author, 6 April 2021).

Still, other indie bands occupy a more ambiguous space in their “cultural branding” and target audiences. Everfor, which began as the solo project of young musician Su Weian, is a Taipei based indie pop four-piece. They formed in 2016 and released their debut Nobody Island in 2018 on the Taipei / Tokyo based Big Romantic Records, which has worked with Sunset Rollercoaster on distributing some of their releases on vinyl, cassette, and CD. This, along with a big push from YouTube and Spotify algorithms, has increased their international exposure. The band

⁹ Jian 2020, 225

¹⁰ https://bandcamp.com/tag/math-rock?tab=all_releases

performs in Mandarin and is yet to tour abroad, but they hope the strength of their instrumentals alone will help them to reach indie fans in other countries:

“Writing songs in English has certain advantages both at home and abroad...but I am not sure that foreign [listeners] will pay special attention to you because of English songs...this will not be the main reason, music should be the focus. I don't know English, so I only use the language I'm familiar with. [Music] is a common language that transcends national boundaries. For us, we believe that the music will take us where we should go.”¹¹

The integration into Western indie scenes bands like Sunset Rollercoaster or Elephant Gym have experienced has given Taiwanese indie music a competitive edge outside of the Chinese speaking world, but to bands (like No Party For Cao Dong) who perform in Mandarin and are seeking to break out of the domestic market and make it big, China is an obvious target. Politics, however, are therefore another unavoidable consideration: Taiwanese artists, should they want to tour in or market to China, can make no explicit reference to Taiwanese national identity.

In the realm of Mandopop, there have been a number of highly publicized incidents where Taiwanese artists were forced to make public apologies after making perceived references to Taiwanese sovereignty. In 2016, Chou Tzuyu, a then sixteen-year-old Taiwanese member of the K-Pop group Twice, faced a huge backlash from Chinese fans after waving a ROC flag on a Korean variety show (Ho 2020, 39). Taiwanese performers, be they indie rockers or Mandopop superstars, must tread lightly should they want to break into the single largest Chinese speaking market in the world. Thomas reflected on this in our conversation:

“...My parents are from China, they were born in Shanghai. So I have some sentiment towards China and I would like to explore the Chinese market...That's why I don't talk about anything political. Because I don't want to get blacklisted in China...Now there are people, who're super pro-Taiwan and pro-independence and they don't care about China. They don't want the RMB, they don't want to make Chinese money, so they don't care about that. I want to explore all markets. And also, I wasn't born in Taiwan, so I don't really have a sense of nationalism.”¹²

Crisis of Authenticity: The Trajectory of “DIY” In The New Wave

While largely independent cultural production still thrives, the subsumption of Taiwan's indie music into public-private and commercial channels is to some, a cause for concern: it has created a dynamic that rewards particular genres, styles, and modes of expression while excluding

¹¹ Su Weian, interview with the author, 24 April 2021

¹² Thomas Hu, interview with the author, 16 April 2021

others. This environment tends towards constructing a cultural landscape concerned primarily with profitability and, as Thomas Hu alluded to earlier, prescribed, arbitrary national values.

As previously noted, one motivation behind the Ministry of Culture's funding of indie music is a play for soft power: official documents from the Executive Yuan state that "the long term goal was to brand Taiwanese popular-music culture and enhance bands' professional reputation throughout the United States and European markets" (Lin; Tsai 2020, 172). Throughout the 21st century, Taiwan has had to compete with regional neighbors in this area: the ubiquitous tendrils of Chinese soft power, the international appeal of Japan's strong cultural exports, and South Korea's flourishing K-pop industry.

Though anxieties around losing out to China as the leader of Mandopop have also driven public policy, the Taiwanese government's "indie cool" approach has it uniquely positioned to beat its Mandarin-speaking rival at the "authenticity game." But this system, now obsessed with marketing "indie," music, rewards some and alienates others. It also blurs the lines of what it means to be an "indie" artist in Taiwan.

The first time I learned of the outsized influence of public funding schemes on Taiwanese indie, I was interviewing Trix at his shop, Waiting Room. The former *Touming Magazine* drummer is about as close to a modern Taiwanese indie veteran as you can get, having been a leading figure in the mid-2000s scene, a DIY ambassador to Japan, and now the mind behind one of Taipei's most cutting edge underground shops. At one point in our conversation, he reached for CDs on the wall of the shop, pulling one after another off the wall, flipping them over to reveal a Ministry of Culture seal. The introduction of direct subsidies to indie artists, "changed a lot," he lamented:

*"People are starting a band because they think 'I don't really have to spend my money, I just need to do the paperwork...[but] if somebody is really talented, but he can't do great paperwork, he will never get money or get any support. For me, it's the wrong direction. I agree with the government supporting artists, but [it comes with conditions.] They will say, 'oh will he make a lot of money, will he be famous or is he the next big star?...I've heard a lot of cases of musicians doing really good paperwork, and when they get the money, they only spend maybe like 10% on the recording. The other 90% they use in other ways, so it ends up in their own pockets.'"*¹³

I asked him if he felt the Taiwanese government was trying to industrialize the production of independent music. He feels they are and explained that he felt that the policies were actually

¹³ Trix (Tang Shi-jie), interview with the author, 20 March 2020.

undermining domestic music production infrastructure and making things less accessible to non-grant recipients:

“Because the recording studio knows that their customers have just received a lot of money for recording...they will try to profit more off of every artist...So the price of recordings has increased...Why does the government have to support the artist directly? We should support a recording studio first because when the recording studio gets a lot of great equipment and skill, they will be able to give a really fair price to the artist.”¹⁴

Government funding poses an ideological challenge to the question of "authenticity" in DIY spaces; the notion of a DIY community has transformed in Taiwan on the whole as a result. According to Trix, terms like “indie” or “DIY” now amount to misnomers:

...it's more like we are doing pop star stuff [now]...I think “indie” is a choice. It's an aesthetic. For me, you can't separate your tastes, all the things you do, the way you act... [it comes through] in your work.¹⁵

Like elsewhere in the world, Taiwan's indie music scene has grown to such an extent that much of what is nominally “indie,” refers more to an aesthetic sensibility rather than the conditions surrounding its production. Conspicuously “indie” artists are pop-ifying the dynamics of the underground community, making it less and less distinguishable from mainstream Mandopop.

Indie was not a moniker willingly adopted by many aspiring professional musicians in Taiwan after the country's opening up: in a society with a high emphasis on academic and vertical achievement, it was unwise, antithetical to “success.” Before indie's new wave, musicians following the path of bands like Touming Magazine were aberrations: the vast majority who sought to pursue music professionally aimed to become studio musicians or Mandopop / commercial crossover artists. High school rock clubs (which first appeared in Taiwan in the late 80s and took off in the 90s), in which teenage musicians from various schools form bands and compete amongst each other for largely attended concerts, were often composed of elite students from high-class backgrounds. They explicitly emphasized technical playing skills and the pursuit of social capital in the inter-academic sphere (Wang 2020, 132). In his article on this subject, and the dominant expressions of rock music in decades past, “How Taiwanese Students Learn: High School Extracurricular Clubs and the Making of Young Rock Musicians,” Chi-chung Wang writes:

¹⁴ Trix (Tang Shi-jie), interview with the author, 20 March 2020.

¹⁵ Trix (Tang Shi-jie), interview with the author, 20 March 2020.

“Live pub musicians were expected to meet the venue owners’ and audiences’ expectations, thus demonstrating that instrumental virtuosity and versatility were the keys to attaining career success. The most desirable option for making a living from music is to become a successful session player, due to a much higher income...From the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, these institutions and job opportunities dictated the career pathway for local musicians, while most also had part-time teaching jobs in music shops or school clubs...Since the mid-1990s, the rise of indie music has offered a set of different musician choices for young rockers. Pure instrumental virtuosity...[has] gradually lost [its] absolute dominant status in the rock scene.”¹⁶

Now fully solidified as a modern neoliberal state (albeit a uniquely positioned one, with contested international recognition etc.) with this robust public funding apparatus, the Taiwanese indie sphere presents itself as a potential career path that is part and parcel of a larger commercial music infrastructure. It has thus begun to lose the DIY character that defined bands like Touming Magazine and, now that it is more beholden to public-private interests, it is less likely to be explicitly political or meaningful “subversive.” Like underground music around the world, Taiwanese indie has entered its “capitalist realist” phase, to borrow a term from British social theorist Mark Fisher. “What we are dealing with now is not the incorporation of materials that seemed to possess subversive potentials, but their precorporation: the pre-emptive [sic] formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations, and hopes by capitalist culture” (Fisher 2009, 9). In the current environment, subversive elements of Taiwanese “indie” have been “precoparated” under the larger capitalist culture, with the aesthetics of underground artists now tantamount to mimicry of previous social and material realities. “‘Alternative’ and ‘independent’ don’t designate something outside the mainstream culture; rather, they are styles, in fact, the dominant styles, within the mainstream” (Fisher 2009, 9). The extent to which this affects the “quality” of new wave indie music is subjective, as these critiques partially hinge on the ideologies of previous underground music formations in Taiwan, but it is a trajectory that is nonetheless worth considering: it speaks to the incongruity in how the new wave of indie musicians understand and define themselves and the new material realities of the communities they inhabit.

Looking Forward: The Success Story of Indie Music In Post-COVID Taiwan

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the strong foundation of the wider music scene and some decisive actions from the central government have allowed it to flourish.

Public life in Taiwan did not go through the pandemic entirely unscathed: it is precisely the preemptive action on health screenings, early policies of containment, and restrictions on gatherings that ensured the pandemic did not strongly affect the country. However, as Thomas Hu recalls, the more severe restrictions that were in place were ultimately short-lived:

¹⁶ Wang 2020, 136-137

We were shut down for three months. I had no gigs...everything was pushed back. And then as soon as summer came around, like, bam, we're safe. The government said, "okay, you can have festivals." And then we just played, like 20 outdoor festivals. And then I played in the bars and you know, we went all over Taiwan.¹⁷

In 2020, at the height of the pandemic, Taiwan famously made headlines for having the only active national baseball league in the world. This relative normalcy extended to its commercial and indie music communities as well, where events large and small remained a regular occurrence. International events involving the participation of Taiwanese musicians, such as Taiwanese Waves, have however been unable to resume as usual. While Taiwanese artists and event organizers have adopted the use of streaming, this is almost entirely because it enables them to participate in international events or target audiences more strongly affected by COVID. The forthcoming Taiwanese Waves festival is tentatively titled "Homecoming," Mia revealed, as bands will be playing pre-recorded sets in Taiwan that will be broadcast as a part of an online festival lineup in partnership with Summer Stage.

Conclusion

What sets artists in the new wave apart from those in Taiwan's previous epochs of alternative and indie music, is their access to several different, equally viable audiences/target markets: the domestic market, the domestic market plus China (in other words, the global Mandopop industry), and American/Western markets. Perhaps most significant is the unprecedented, organic integration of Taiwanese indie artists into the very American and Western indie music communities that have long been a major source of inspiration.

Though Taiwan's "indie" is largely no longer independent in any meaningful sense, it is a fertile music landscape existing outside the Mandopop industrial monolith. The net result of this is that it is easier than ever for Taiwanese musicians to get a foot in the door, find fans around the world, and make a living.

In spite of Taiwan's historical backdrop of political instability and uneven development, its rapid industrialization, liberalization and later, the targeted promotion and funding of its culture industry on all levels, has transformed the country into one of the most competitive producers of modern indie music.

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¹⁷ Thomas Hu, interview with the author, 16 April 2021

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