



Qualitative Sociology Review

Volume III, Issue 3 – December 2007

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.3.3.03>

Basile Zimmermann
University of Geneva, Switzerland

Tracing the Action of Technical Objects in an Ethnography: Vinyls in Beijing

Abstract

To do ethnography implies dealing with the agency of technical objectsⁱ. The aim of this paper is to share a few ideas on how to tackle the one of vinyls in the particular activity that is the *mix* of a disc jockey. To do so, I first provide a general picture of the work of Xiao Deng, a Chinese disc jockey I observed in Beijing between 2003 and 2004. Then I present three observations of specific events that occurred during that period which, I believe, bring into light not only some specificities of the agency of the technical object “vinyl” but also useful information about how one can take into account the agency of objects when doing ethnography.

Keywords

Technical objects; Technology; Agency; Ethnography; Music; Vinyls; Disc Jockey; China; Beijing

Before writing about Beijing, electronic music and vinyls, I would like to give some information about the reasons that gave birth to the lines that follow.

All data were collected by myself between August 2001 and August 2004 during field research I conducted in Beijing for a Ph.D. thesis in Chinese studies that I eventually defended in July 2006, at the University of Geneva in Switzerland. The discussion suggested here is, in a way, an English summary of a section of the original penumⁱⁱ.

A dissertation in Chinese studies is, in most cases, a very different work than a dissertation in social sciences. While this paper on ethnographical work is not the place to discuss the differences between the two disciplines (we are indeed missing a lot of fun), I would like to point out that the main idea I had in mind during the research was to “understand the meaning of foreign technical objects in China”. This formulation was confusing, but its direction was much clearer: I wanted to contribute to a better understanding of what was happening in China at the time. Modern technical objects --I mean computers, mobile phones, video games, these kinds of objects - were obviously playing a major role which I wanted to analyze. As one could easily observe, most of this recent technology was invented and certified by Westerners (a striking example is the computer ASCII keyboard - the first letter, “A”, stands for *American*)ⁱⁱⁱ and I had therefore labeled the goal of my research with the

word “foreign technical objects”.

In 2001, at the beginning of the research, I had already a solid background in computer music which I had studied at the Institut de Musique Electroacoustique et Informatique of Geneva from 1997 to 2000. At that time, I had wanted to become a professional computer musician and I had spent three years sparing no energy in studying its ins and outs, before eventually changing my mind and going back to Chinese studies. This unrequired knowledge for a sinologist Ph.D. candidate had a strong influence on the decision to focus the research on “music creation involving technical objects”.

Although very little was known at the time about electronic music in China and there was plenty of work to do, my goal was, -- from the very beginning --, to try to discover new theoretical concepts. I did not pursue the objective of providing an ethnography of something like “electronic music in Beijing at the Banana club”, or an historical picture of “techno djing in Beijing at the end of the nineties”, for example. On the contrary, I organized my field research so that I would focus simultaneously on highly different fields, in order to maximize differences among emerging concepts. Thus, apart from the Chinese disc jockeys and vinyls presented below, I have observed the interaction of a computer musician with his software, a noise-music composer with his headphones and portable digital studio, a rock band with their synthesizers, and some other minor observations on mobile phones and everyday activities using a computer.

How the observations were conducted

Thanks to the advice of my co-advisor, Prof. Ellen Hertz, my first readings in social sciences were *Outsiders* (Becker 1973) and *Artworlds* (Becker 1982). Until today, even now that many other readings have followed, these two books remain the works that influence the most the way I conduct and compose my scientific contributions. Later, they were joined by *Basics for Qualitative Research* (Corbin and Strauss 1998), and *Tricks of the Trade: How to Think about Your Research While You're Doing It* (Becker 1998). Since these are famous works in the field, I am not going to present them in detail here but discuss the main methodological points that I had in my mind while observing the activities of Xiao Deng and his vinyls, together with those that guide me today while writing these lines.

Two ideas that I would like to mention are the one of “art as collective action” (Becker 1982) and the general idea that “things are not going to be as (I) expected”. Although I was interested in the user to technical object relationship, it was very clear for me that I had to pay attention to simply *everything* I saw. Thus, I spent much time writing down notes about the audience in the clubs, employees, the weather, my own feelings at the moment, and so on, in order to make sure I could keep a general picture of the flow of information.

Since I had quickly got the feeling that taking notes while being with the people I was observing was not a good idea (I felt uncomfortable, and my interviewees were quickly suspicious), I wrote down my notes mostly at my home, late at night when I came back or often the next morning upon waking-up. On some rare occasions, I took notes on the spot, took pictures, did recordings, and collected materials that required direct intervention. Now that I want to share my observations, I am trying to express myself using simple and clear language, as I always much appreciated in the writings of Becker.

The data indeed had a long journey, changing forms from the spot to my field notes in French, to my Ph.D. dissertation, and finally to this paper in English (which is

not my first language, and was corrected by a friend). As the reader must have noticed, I favour an autobiographical account, rather than a methodologically or theoretically oriented one.

On the field

All the observations presented below were collected between August 2003 and August 2004, in the city of Beijing, except for one situation I observed in Shanghai (see observation number 3). This stay in China was accomplished thanks to a grant of the Swiss National Science Foundation, and was part of a series of three studies in Beijing that started during the summer 2001, when I did short-time field research (five weeks) on the electronic music scene and met Xiao Deng for the first time. After the main field research in 2003-2004, I went back to China and spent the summer 2005 in Beijing again (including a four-week' stay at Xiao Deng's place, who has become a close friend).

Two aspects of my previous studies have been of enormous help while collecting the data. First, as I graduated in Chinese studies in February 1997 and then spent one year in Beijing in 1997-1998, I was already pretty fluent in Mandarin at the beginning of the research. Most of my interviewees were not able to communicate easily in English or in any other Western language, and so most discussions were conducted in Chinese. Second, as I am a musician too, most Chinese musicians were very interested in exchanging thoughts with me as soon as they knew that I was "a musician too". As a strongly technique-oriented computer musician (I belong to the minority few who enjoy reading user-manuals, and spending days and nights trying to master the ins and outs of the tools), most musicians I met in China were very much interested in my technical knowledge. Our discussions, most of the time, focused on the technical tools used by musicians ("What software do you use?"; "Did you try this particular synthesizer?" "What do you think about it?"). This aspect was reinforced by the fact that Westerners are usually well seen in Beijing's art circles, and that many foreigners go to Beijing clubs on a regular basis. Speaking and exchanging ideas with a European was not something exceptional.

After the first contacts I had had with local musicians during the summer 2001, and my general impression at the time, I decided to focus on three different "electronic music artists" for the main twelve months of research in 2003-2004. In particular, I wanted to observe the activity of one disc jockey and his, or her^{iv}, interaction with the technical objects present at the dj-desks. If I had had a good feeling with Xiao Deng during a two-hour's chat we had in August 2001 at our first meeting, when we saw each other again in August 2003 he seemed very busy and it remained unclear whether I would be able to know more about him and his artistic activities (he was djing and writing songs) until the beginning of the year 2004.

The clubs

Between August 2003 and August 2004, a club (“club” in English or in Chinese 俱乐部¹ *julebu*) as referred to by my local musicians friends, was a place where people met, drank, and danced, especially on Friday and Saturday evenings. There were only about a dozen clubs in the city, and most were located in the neighborhood of the Bar street (酒吧街 *jiubajie*) in Sanlitun 三里屯, which was generally considered by most Chinese and foreign habitants of the capital I have met as the district where the nightlife of the city took place. This fact could be observed by taking a cab at night, between midnight and the early morning, to notice that if most districts were dark and quiet, the surroundings of the clubs were illuminated and noisy.

If I did not spend most of my time interviewing customers, owners, and employees of the different clubs, I performed a few comparative tests between what I observed in the club where Xiao Deng played most of the time and the other places, in order to help me understand what was going on. For example, I spent once one whole night going from one club to another and back, trying to compare the size of the audiences, the type of music, the prices, and the artists that were playing. This kind of exercise was very tiring, and very frustrating in the sense that the size of the audience could vary very fast depending on the time (e.g. nobody at 9 p.m. but a huge crowd at 11 p.m.); during the time it took me to move from one club to another and back, things had sometimes already changed a lot.

According to these rapid observations, the crowds differed visually from one club to another: some had very few body movements while dancing and the clothing of the people appeared cheaper and cautious; some performed exuberant dances, and looked expensively and fashionably dressed. Of course, these differences varied a lot during the year. When asked about differences between clubs, Xiao Deng and his friends, and also most foreign or Chinese people I talked to, often referred to electronic music subgenres like *minimal techno*, *house*, *hip hop*, *drum'n bass*, and so on, which they linked to economic or social status (“It is a cheap place, only kids go there”; “That club is for prostitutes and big guys”; “That club is frequented by models and famous people”) to categorize the differences between clubs. Xiao Deng, according to this scheme, was a *techno* DJ, mixing at *techno* clubs, which were the most expensive of the city and frequented by “models and famous people”. Xiao Deng and his friends considered these places as the “best clubs” of the city.

However, these details about Beijing clubs, regarding the main observations I would like to point out later in this article, do not really matter. Therefore, I simply would like to conclude these comments by saying that the nightlife of Beijing clubs was, to my eyes, in size as in kind, somehow similar to the nightlife of my hometown, Geneva, in Switzerland. As such, there were indeed many differences between them, the most obvious one being the fact that the population of the two cities has a ratio of 20 to 1. Of course, there were hundreds of local particularities as well, but still, Beijing clubs deserved the label “electronic music” and “club”. In the same way as a “swimming-pool” is, in most countries, a place where people go to swim, those places were there for people to meet, drink, listen to music and dance. As a researcher, they were the places where I had to go on Friday and Saturday nights to meet musicians, observe the work of disc jockeys, and confront the discourses of my interviewees.

¹ Technical note: uploaded SongTi or STSong font is required to see the original Chinese characters in this article.

Verification techniques

Inside the clubs, the music was usually very loud and there was a lot of cigarette-smoke. Most of the time, as I came early and stayed until late in the morning, going there on a regular basis was extremely tiring. I also have to confess that, although I had several years of practice in computer music, my experience of club dance parties in Europe was, at that time, almost non-existent. To suddenly spend so much time in clubs was indeed a very special experience for me. The clubs were very important places for two of the artists I was observing, and whether I liked it or not (ok, I liked it), I had to go there every time there was a party. Some evenings, when I did not feel like going out at all, this obligation was extraordinarily painful. Some other evenings, when I did feel like going out, it was very distracting. How not to have fun in a place everybody came to have fun?

After about six months of weekly appearance in the clubs, my obstinacy bore fruit: my presence was known and accepted by Xiao Deng and most of his acquaintances; I could meet many musicians at the same time (many were quite obviously using the parties to negotiate contracts, collaborations and so on), and I moved very easily from one group to another, collecting information through informal discussions as well as direct questioning.

In most cases, I simply tried to cross-check information between sources. For example, if someone mentioned the fact that someone else had given her special software, I would ask the person about the software, saying something like “this person said you gave him this software, do you use it very often?”. I could then find out if the software had really gone through the path sketched out by the other informant, and know more about the competences of the person who made it circulate that way. After several weeks, I could figure out who was usually very precise in her or his descriptions of facts, who liked to inflate things a little bit, who enjoyed talking about technical stuff, and so on. This method helped me also to trace a little bit how the information about myself was spreading among the musicians, and how elements I had mentioned in other conversations (especially technical information) had been considered.

I also asked the musicians I had selected as my main sources to give me some pieces of music they had composed one or two years *before* we met. These works, upon which I could not possibly have had any influence, were precious sources of insight about the accuracy of their discourses on how they created new pieces of music: for the one who has the tools and the knowledge, a recording contains a lot of technical information that can be analyzed and tested. For example, a mp3 file, once put on a compact disc, does not sound the same as a recording from, say, a vinyl. By comparing the stories told by the artists with technical elements present in the works, I have often been able to confirm, or disprove, the information that had been given about the use of one or another technical object. This information, as well as the technical processes involved, were insights about the accuracy of other information people were giving about their current, unfinished, work.

Anonymity of the artists, and censorship of the author

As the lector may have already noticed, all information in this article that could help the reader identify Xiao Deng or his friends have been systematically hidden. I use pseudonyms to refer to the informants, and I do not even mention the clubs' names in Beijing. If it is a habit in social sciences to respect the private life of the

sources, the somewhat extreme discretion taken in this paper is related to a specific methodological choice.

To have an artist talk openly and thoroughly about her work is not an easy matter. While most artists are usually willing to explain how they succeeded in creating a new work of art, many are reluctant to tell how they failed to perform certain tasks, especially if they believe the explanations behind the failure would give them a bad image. Doubts, mistakes, failures, and shames are therefore, according to my experience, among the most difficult data to get when doing field research on artistic work. As this research focused on the use of technical objects, it was obvious to me that the most interesting situations were *precisely* those involving failures and mistakes, -- because such cases often bring into the light what is really going on between the tools and its users (compare with a car accident, and how the description of the process of this awful event give hundreds of items of data about the driver, the car, and the interaction between the two)^v.

In order to get this kind of precious data, and to avoid artists trying hard to give an special image of themselves and their work, or hide on their real difficulties or technical peculiarities, I have systematically explained several times to my informants that my research was on “technical objects, not artists”, and that their names would never appear in a book or in a article because “that is not the topic of the research”. I also selected artists that I felt could become, through the path of the field research, real friends. As often with close friendship, one does not pay much attention to give a certain picture of oneself, because one knows that the other one will not give away “harmful” information. This method, in the case of Xiao Deng, both furthered and held back the research: Xiao Deng communicated very intimately with me, shared inner thoughts, personal difficulties and life situations; but now that I know this article will be published on the Internet, how can I possibly use this kind of private information? I definitely collected precious information working this way *and* censured valuable data writing this article because I do not want to harm my friend in any way if he, or anyone related to him, was to come across these lines.

In the end, although I am pretty satisfied with the observations I managed to collect, if I imagine myself as the reader of this paper, who did not experience the field research as I did, I think I would have the feeling that some things are missing, that descriptions could be more precise or more developed. Facing these weaknesses, which are clearly part of this research too, I have to say it was not easy for me to go to someone else’s home, especially a close friend, to take pictures of his everyday life and ask personal questions without embarrassment. Since I was not writing, say, an interview for a music magazine, my goal was not to show the good quality of his work. I was there to find out “what was happening” between him and his tools. I often felt very uncomfortable asking Xiao Deng for specific information I knew he wasn’t willing to share (for example, how he ended up using one synthesizer instead of another one). Several times, in order to make sure I would get the information I believed was most important for my research, I willingly gave up collecting trivial biographical information (for example information about his family), to make room for a more informal technical dialog (a debate “between artists” about a specific technical process is a very different discussion than an interview with a person asking questions and the other one answering).

Xiao Deng, his vinyls, and some other people or things that acted

Xiao Deng, in 2003-2004, was a professional disc jockey in the sense that his skills were very high, --he had been mixing for many years and was considered by his peers as one of the best DJ in China --, and that this activity was his main source of income. I will first present the conditions under which I came to know him, how I conducted the field research on his activities, and then provide a detailed account of my main observations.

I met Xiao Deng for the first time in August 2001. He had been hired to mix one night in a club where I was going to on a regular basis to observe the activities of a group of live musicians. When I saw him at the dj-desk, I remember being struck by his mixing skills: his movements were fast and precise, he seemed to have many years of practice. After his set, I was introduced to him by an acquaintance and we exchanged a few words. He told me he had started to use a computer to write songs, and we agreed I would visit him at his home after a few days so that he would let me hear his music. One must note that at that time, I wasn't interested in observing disc jockeys. After I had visited him at his home, I came to the conclusion that his work as a beginning composer didn't provide enough data for my research, and I decided neither to conduct further research about his work, nor to keep in touch with him.

In August 2003 however, the situation was different. Following my inquiries about technical objects, readings and discussions with my advisors, I wanted to find a disc jockey whose activities I could observe in details during my stay, so as to focus on the related technical objects. Since I had already met Xiao Deng once, and I knew from another musician I had regular e-mail contact with that he was still very active on the Beijing scene, the idea of observing his djing activity came naturally to my mind. I went to see him a few weeks after my arrival in Beijing, and after several months of regular meetings at the clubs where he was playing, -- I leave out here the inescapable hassle of getting closer to the informant --, Xiao Deng and I became friends. In March 2004 I could conduct my observations in a very comfortable setting, and it was clear to me that he would be "the DJ" of my research (next to a computer musician, a noise artist, a synthesizer player, and a few others).

As mentioned before, in the past, although I had spent much time doing computer music, my musical activities in Switzerland had always been limited to the somewhat "academic" and "experimental" circles. When I arrived in Beijing in August 2003, I did not really know what a disc jockey was, and my experience of club dance parties was minimal. To spend two nights a week, at least, observing Xiao Deng's activity, and meeting other musicians, was completely new for me. To mention but one example of unexpected discovery, at the end of 2003 I realized Xiao Deng and his mates were going to bed about 4 a.m. and waking up around midday *every day of the week*. I had to change my life schedule in order to be able to keep up with them. As the research went on, I eventually stabilized my sleeping-time to 7 a.m. - 2 p.m. (for those who wonder, it means about a month of headaches until the body gets used to the new setting, and one's facial skin -- deprived of sun-rays -- gets a yellowish tan, alas different than the local color).

Xiao Deng and I shared a common taste in some matters of electronic music. We both admired the work of Richie Hawtin (a famous canadian disc jockey and composer), and we both owned recordings of a style of music that is usually called *minimal techno*. Our paths separated, however, on the field of experimental music (which he did not like very much), and dance music (which I did not like very much at that time). Besides, a strong link between us was established on the basis of my technical computer music skills, which were much appreciated by Xiao Deng. I

helped him several times to solve technical problems with his machines, worked twice as a sound engineer for two of his songs, and he often introduced me to his friends by emphasizing my technical knowledge. One must note, however, that although Xiao Deng and I spent many hours together, shared experiences and thoughts, those were focused on his work as a computer musician. I don't think I had any influence on this work as a disc jockey, an activity which he had been practicing for many years and in which he was very self-confident.

Biographical elements

On the basis of Xiao Deng's own story about himself, and a few items of information gathered among his friends and family, I will now give some biographical elements about his life, so as to give the reader a general idea about his background. To respect his anonymity, some details have been replaced by more general descriptions; above all, real names and exact locations are not mentioned.

Xiao Deng was born at the end of the seventies, in a province located in the north of China. His father was an actor, his elder brother a musician, his mother had some experience as a Chinese opera singer, and as a child he benefited from his family orientation toward the arts. At the age of eleven, he passed the examination for the Beijing Dance Academy (the best in China), where he studied traditional Chinese dance and went to high school. Upon graduation, although he was a good dancer and two departments wanted him to continue his training at the Academy in the professional sections, he decided to quit and moved to the south of China where he started to work in a bar as a go-go dancer. He quickly became interested in the activity of the local DJs (who were not mixing but only "playing" compact discs, --see the description of the mix below), and eventually started to dj himself.

The timing was very auspicious: in the mid-nineties there were scarcely any DJs in the country, and as soon as he started this activity, many places were willing to hire him. On the behalf of his musical knowledge acquired during his dance studies, Xiao Deng had learnt the basic skills of dging very fast and he could soon make a living upon this activity. He worked in clubs and moved from one province to another with a friend who was working as MC (short form for Master of Ceremony, a person who talks to the audience while people dance). They made short stays in various places, including one club in the Hunan province (in the south of China) where Xiao Deng's monthly salary went up to 7'000 *reminbi* (about US\$843 at the time), together with free lodging in a four stars hostel belonging to the owner of the club. After some time, Xiao Deng eventually settled down in the city of Shenzhen, south China, close to the Hong Kong border. His monthly salary had then reached 15'000 *reminbi* (sic). One must know that these amounts, as indicated by Xiao Deng, were large sums of money (about eight times the salary of a taxi driver). They coincide with the peak of dance events in Beijing, when DJs were very successful, -- a period often referred to with nostalgia by the DJs I have met during the last few years.

In 2000-2001, Xiao Deng moved back to Beijing and started to work at a local club as a resident DJ (i.e. a disc jockey who works for a club on a regular basis; in Xiao Deng's case several days a week). He made friend with a Japanese student, who quickly became his co-tenant, promoter, manager, and supplier of vinyls and electronic music devices (through frequent trips to Japan).

The Year 2003-2004

From August 2003 to August 2004, when I observed Xiao Deng's activities, he was among the few DJs of the capital regularly invited to play in other provinces, as well as at the local clubs. Apart from his djing activity, Xiao Deng also composed songs at the request of different backers (I noted three: a beer company, a soccer event, and a famous Japanese producer). Although he had been a resident DJ in the past, during these twelve months he worked as an independent disc jockey, not attached in any way to a specific club. His Japanese friend was taking care of the larger part of the administrative work related to his djing performances, including contacts with the club owners, financial deals, promotion of the events (through posters and flyers), and so on.

Xiao Deng's status, as a disc jockey, was clearly established by several facts. He was mixing once or twice a week at clubs whose entry price was the highest in the city (50 *renminbi* --about US\$6--, most other clubs had an entrance fee from 10 to 30 *renminbi*). Most often, his coming to an event was announced a few days in advance by various posters and flyers displayed in the clubs and other places in the city (e.g. shops, bars, or foreign student dormitories at the universities^{vi}). His competences as a DJ, stressed by his peers whenever I asked them their opinion on him, focused on his body movements. In my opinion, this particular skill was clearly linked to his previous training as a professional dancer (the necessary competence is the same, listen and move one's body accordingly). Although he did not practice *scratch* (the art of accelerating or decelerating a vinyl with one's hand, to create pitching effects)^{vii}, he was very clearly making, in a much more obvious way than other DJs, all kinds of changes and sound effects that most of his colleagues did not perform, concentrating instead on the choice of the records only. Although it has not been mentioned by any of my interviewees, I believe Xiao Deng had also a sense of rhythm and an above average understanding of the crowd's "feeling of dance". An aspect I could observe in the reaction of the people dancing, was that they looked more enthusiastic when he, rather than "average" disc jockey, was playing.

Xiao Deng and most of his disc jockey friends could be grouped under the banners of dance music subgenres *techno* and *house* (with their many variations, *techno-house*, *deep house*, etc.). *Techno*, as a subgenre of the club dance-music style, was often used by Xiao Deng to categorize his work: he was, in his own words, a *techno* DJ. He notably used this description to express a difference with *hip hop*, a subgenre he had mixed some years ago and that was, in 2003-2004, played in other clubs and by DJs that did not mix up much with Xiao Deng and the people around him (although fascinating, the different uses, representations, constructions and deconstructions of the musical styles and subgenres by the informants go far beyond the scope of this paper, -- which focuses on technical objects. For this reason, they are not discussed in detail here.)

The Mix

The activity of Xiao Deng and the other disc jockeys I observed during the field work consisted in most cases in selecting recordings (mostly vinyl discs, but they sometimes used other mediums, like compact discs, tapes, or digital files played directly from a computer), and then chain them so that there would be no interruption in the music.^{viii} This practice was described by both Chinese and Western informants with the English word *mix*^{ix}, which referred at the same time to the general activity of the DJs while playing in the clubs and to the transition procedure -- the *mix*, that is -- between two different musical sources.

Sometimes DJs would just add pieces of music rhythmically, so that the transition from one song to another became imperceptible (the audience would have the feeling of one single song lasting several hours) and contribute to bring the crowd to a state of trance. Sometimes, on the contrary, they would link very different styles or subgenres, and generate special contrasts in the atmosphere that would make the structure of the whole performance mosaic-like. Sometimes, they would superimpose recordings, and let both records play together more than a minute or two, so as to create completely new musical pieces.

If I noted a few situations where some of Xiao Deng's DJ friends were employed by radios, department stores, or other institutions, their activity occurred for the most part at night in bars and clubs. In general, a local disc jockey in Beijing was a man, who owned a substantial collection of vinyls or compact discs. Every time he went to work, he would carry a selection of these records with him, and play them at the dj-desk of a club, using the turn-tables and cd players provided. A first selection of the records -- an average of 60 to 80 -- was done at home (impossible to carry all the records), and therefore the music one could mix was limited because it was impossible to mix a record which was not in the selection of the day. However, I believe important choices between available records occurred at the dj-desk, according to the crowd's response to the music. In a way, the mixing process was indeed a "mix" of the choices at the artist's disposal, between available records in his selection and possibilities or impossibilities of mixing one song with another (considering their respective musical structures), plus his reading of the crowd's reactions, calling for certain forms of music.

For the audience, as well as the other disc jockeys, the *choice* of musical pieces, which I will discuss again later, constituted one criterion to determine the difference between a "good" and a "bad" DJ. It can be compared, I think, to the listening of music at home: if some songs are very pleasant to the ear in the afternoon, others are more likely listened to in the morning, or in the evening. In the same way, a song the listener already heard many times will not make the same impression as a song being heard for the very first time. A techno DJ, in Beijing between 2003 and 2004, was someone who was able to feel the mood of an audience and correctly determine which kind of music to play at that particular moment. Of course, there were also many other criteria that made a Beijing DJ well-known or appreciated by his audience, such as gestures and shouts at the crowd while playing, fame and so on.

Process of the mix

The hiring of Xiao Deng as a disc jockey for a dance event has always occurred, as far as I have observed, without the support of any written document. For example, Xiao Deng was contacted by someone he knew (by phone, text-message, e-mail, during a conversation in a club, or by chat on the Internet) who would ask him if he could mix at a certain place on a certain date (the exact time of the mix was usually fixed later). This person was most of the time another DJ or the manager of a club.

Another scenario, which I haven't been able to collect much information about but which was very frequent, was when the event was organized by Xiao Deng's Japanese manager, who contacted the manager of a club, and offered to organize a party. A big difference between these two scenarios was that in the first case, Xiao Deng cared only about his work as a disc jockey (i.e. bring his vinyls, and mix them), and received his money in cash from the club after his set. In the second case, the Japanese friend took care of most of the promotion and installation for the event, collected the entrance fees (which he would keep while the manager of the club kept the money resulting from the selling of beverages), and gave Xiao Deng (who also, according to his own schedule, gave a hand promoting and setting up the event) his share.

The days he played, Xiao Deng had to decide which records to take with him for his mix. If he occasionally made the selection quickly before leaving his house, most of the time, he started the day before, or several hours in advance. A vinyl is not a very light object, he could carry no more than three hundred. In most cases, he carried about sixty to one hundred, and this amount went down to twenty (for an easy and short party for which he was pretty sure he knew what to expect), and up to two hundred for an important event where the audience's taste wasn't at all clear to him. He used special DJ bags to carry the vinyls. One was small, could hold about fifty records and was slung across the shoulder. Another one was much bigger and wheeled, it could hold up to five hundred vinyls. When using this second bag, Xiao Deng usually also put his headphones and other belongings in it, next to the records.

If the event was organized by his work group (constituted of the Japanese promoter, a Chinese girl who was in charge of public relations and wrote all texts related to the events, Xiao Deng's girlfriend, a second DJ and his girlfriend, plus additional staff, whose number varied according to needs), he usually arrived at the premises around six p.m., to help installing the dj-desk, setting up the loudspeakers (if necessary), decoration, and so on. If the event was to happen in a place already set up (e.g. a bar), or was organized by others, Xiao Deng came two or three hours before his set, and had a few beers waiting for his turn to mix. Typically, a party had between two and four different disc jockeys. The first played from, say, 11 p.m. to 1 a.m., the second from 1 a.m. to 3 a.m., and so on. The schedule seemed to vary on the basis of three criteria: the size of the event, fame of the DJs, and the amount of public. Most of the time, the DJ considered to be the most important played at the time when the audience was at its maximum, in general between 1 a.m. and 4 a.m.

Once at the dj-desk, a double-sided process took place: on one hand, Xiao Deng chose the next vinyl to play on the turn-tables. The *techno* songs he used to play had an average time of seven minutes, but he rarely played them from beginning to end; a change was likely to occur every four to five minutes. On the other hand, Xiao Deng created different kinds of variations over the music, using the audio effects provided by the dj-mixer (e.g. volume variations, changes in equalization, reverberation or delay).

A set usually lasted between two to four hours. While mixing, the activity of Xiao Deng took on a cyclical form. One vinyl playing on the first turn-table, he took a second one, put it on the second turn-table and listened to it using headphones (so that the audience couldn't hear the sound of the second vinyl being examined), and synchronized its speed to the first vinyl using the pitch-tracking knob. He located in the musical structure a moment that seemed appropriate to start the combination of the two records (the one already playing and the new one), and stopped the second record at this particular spot. When the playing of the first record reached a suitable moment, he started the second record, and, using the control knob for the volume of the second turn-table, operated the transition from the first record to the second one. Once the transition had been carried out successfully, he started anew, with another record. This operation, the *mix* that is, could last between less than a second if one record was suddenly stopped (imagine a relay), to a minute or two with the two records playing together and the overlaying of the two making up what is sometimes called "the third record". While performing these repetitive movements, Xiao Deng carefully observed the audience's reactions to the music, and made his choices of the next records to be played accordingly^x. This question, at least as I observed it on the *techno* scene in Beijing at that time, seemed to be a very important aspect of a DJ's activity: to play according to the audience.

Sometimes, Xiao Deng chose a record, put it on one of the two turn-tables, listened to it, and decided not to play it. He then started again with another one. Alternately with the activity of selection, he created many personal variations on the music. He could make two records play at the same time, as described earlier, or modify the parameters of the control knobs on the dj-mixer. In the first case, he sometimes used two somehow similar songs. The transition then went unnoticed by the audience, giving the people the feeling of a long song. This kind of transition, where technical subtleties went mostly unnoticed, was not, I believe, very important to the audience, but any musician familiar with the art of mixing present in the club could admire his technical skills. One criteria for a "bad" mix, as discussed by Xiao Deng and his mates, was when a DJ would mistake bars, creating unintentional superpositions between two songs.

As mentioned before, Xiao Deng was particularly talented in using the control knobs of the dj-mixer to create effects over the music. For example, he quickly turned down the volume, and then turned it up a few seconds later, synchronizing the silent period with the current rhythm. In a similar way, he used his sense of rhythm to modify the settings of the high, medium, or low frequencies, or add special effects provided by the mixer. He often combined these changes with the superposition of songs, so that the mix of the different tunes sounded appropriate. Since Xiao Deng was especially talented for this sort of manipulations, he used it a lot. He was fast, precise, and looked very natural compared to other DJs whose eyebrow movements, body stiffness, or obvious mistakes, were frequent. His self-confidence was also noticeable when he was answering my questions. For example, he once told me he didn't really "think" about the next record while playing, but that he "felt" the best choice by looking at the covers of the records. He had, I believe, some kind of unconscious competence, synonymous of a great mastery of his tools, constituted of the control knobs as well as of his records collection.

The average length of a mix by Xiao Deng was about two to three hours, and repeated two to three times during one evening. For example, he mixed from 11 p.m. to 1 a.m., then was replaced by another DJ during two hours, and then played again from 3 a.m. to 5 a.m. When he was not mixing, or just standing in the clubs listening to other DJs' sets and meeting friends, Xiao Deng was mostly staying at home with

his girlfriend. He smoked, drank beers, and described himself as a slacker who had huge difficulties to act if not under pressure. For example, if he was to compose a song, he preferred to have an order, with a fixed deadline. My observations have confirmed this personal diagnosis.

Choice of the records on the Internet

In order to bring new music to the public, Xiao Deng was regularly buying new records. Unfortunately, at that time, there was no vinyls shop for DJs in Beijing (as there were many in Geneva, for example). For this reason, he followed a special procedure: he first went on dedicated Internet websites (e.g. labels websites, or on-line vinyls shops), through which he could listen to sound excerpts and write down the names of the records he wanted to buy. In mid-2004, when I observed him doing this work at his home, he used the website *decks-records.de*. Here is a screenshot, taken in Xiao Deng's personal home computer in June 2004.



Figure 1

Xiao Deng explained me how he usually clicked on the section “Techno-News” (the thumb on the upper left side), and then paid attention to this section only. From left to right on the illustration above, we see in the lower part an image of the cover of a record, the name of the artist, subgenre information, the name of the label, and the possibility to listen to a short excerpt in mp3 format (represented by a loudspeaker icon). According to Xiao Deng, this section helped him instantly access new records of the musical subgenre he was interested in (i.e. *techno*). He listened to the excerpts (about thirty seconds for each song), and wrote down a list of his choices of future acquisitions. After that, he gave the list to his Japanese friend, who used the

opportunity of a trip to Japan to go to a vinyls shop (it was not rare that some records would already be sold out)^{xi}. Once purchased, Xiao Deng listened to the records at his home, and put them in storage boxes.

Equipment

Below is a picture of the desk where Xiao Deng had installed his two turntables, and where he used to practice his mixes. The turn-tables and the dj-mixer are similar to those available in the clubs at the time.



Figure 2 Xiao Deng's home, June 2004.

- a. 1 Technics 1200 turn-table (second hand, bought by Xiao Deng in Shenzhen for about RMB1000) (US\$120)
- b. 1 vinyl (this one is a promotional record, sent by a friend from France, that's why it isn't labeled, just a few hand-written signs).
- c. 1 dj-mixer Vestax 50A (second hand, bought by Xiao Deng in Beijing through a Japanese acquaintance, about RMB15'000, US\$1807).
- d. A second turntable (same origin and price as the one on the left).
- e. 1 pair of Sony headphones^{xii} (lent by his Japanese co-tenant, but belonged to another Japanese friend who was also a DJ).
- f. Vinyls could be found all over the place, notably behind the first turn-table, on the second turn-table, and under the desk.

(One can also note over the Vestax dj-mixer a small box with fake vampire teeth Xiao Deng had bought for a fetishist party^{xiii}, as "to take part a little bit in the atmosphere", he said).

I estimated the amount of vinyls owned by Xiao Deng around 1'500. Although I never saw his compact discs, I believe he had quite a lot of them too, because he told me he used to mix cds when he started. Since he was now using only vinyls, those could not be seen at his home, so I guess they were stored somewhere in his apartment.

The Audience at the parties

As mentioned earlier, since I did not do systematic interviews of the people I met at the clubs, I am not able to give much information about Xiao Deng's audience. Based on my own, mostly visual, observations, and informal conversations I had here and there during the hundred or so times I was at the clubs, I would say that Xiao Deng's average public was composed mostly of Chinese people but with a substantial minority of foreigners whose proportion could be anywhere between ten and fifty percent, depending on various factors^{xiv}. The total amount of clubbers seldom exceeded a few hundred (in general about one hundred for a small event, and about five hundred for a big one; local managers of each club moving the furniture and other installations accordingly so that the place would always look full of people), and the majority of people, Chinese or foreigners, was between twenty and thirty years old.

The main activity, as seen by an external observer, consisted in getting together on Friday and Saturday nights, to dance and drink alcohol. From the point of view of the managers, the goal seemed first to be able to get as much people as possible, who were hoped to spend as much money as possible. This objective, except for a few very successful clubs, was hardly ever reached. A description of Beijing clubs at that time could easily have had a sentence pointing out "places sometimes very crowded during week ends but empty most of the time." For this reason maybe, clubs had, so I heard, an average life expectancy of one to two years.

The criteria of the presence or absence of people, many or few, was used by everyone to qualify the success of an event. It was related to financial considerations for the managers, to the atmosphere for the public, and to both for Xiao Deng whose income and fame depended on it. The usual question, for someone who was outside calling someone inside a club at the moment of the party was: "Are there many people?" (人多吗? *Ren duo ma?*). If the question can be easily understood for a manager, whose income is usually related to the amount of money spent by the audience, it is more difficult to explain for the other people. The explanations given by those I met in the clubs where Xiao Deng was playing were as follow: the employees were bored if the people were not so numerous, there indeed was less work to do but they preferred an active and "lively" (热闹 *renao*) atmosphere (the question of losing their job or not, in case of bankruptcy, didn't seem to be an issue -- maybe because it was easy for them to find another job, as explained to me by a manager); the people in the public, which I asked several times about the comparison with sightseeing (situation where, to my experience, in China as in Europe, most people prefer not to be in the middle of a crowd), spoke about their desire of "being with other people" (跟别人在一起 *gen bieren zai yiqi*); finally, DJs insisted on the necessity to "communicate" (交流 *jiaoliu*) with the audience to make a good mix.

Xiao Deng, in particular, stressed the importance of interaction with the crowd, because, he said, "the feeling is different" (感觉不一样 *ganjue bu yiyang*) than with a mix done at his home^{xv}. This special relationship between a DJ and his audience

wasn't always positive. I remember a discussion with Zheng Dao^{xvi} (a well-known local disc jockey) who had finished a set and looked particularly upset. When I asked him why, he told me he had enough of "serving the junkies" (为吸毒者服务 *wei xiduzhe fuwu*^{xvii}), that he had been forced to mix only to give them a feeling of "glide" (飞 *fei*, literally "fly"), and that he did not have any interest in doing so^{xviii}.

Because one of the other musicians I was observing for my research worked as a manager in a club (Lao Dong, the "computer musician", not discussed in this paper), I spent much time in different clubs hearing the managers speaking and arguing about their business. I came to the conclusion that there did not exist a ready-made formula to make people come to a club on a regular basis. The success (i.e. the continuous presence of a numerous audience) seemed to be dependent on a subtle mix of many elements: location of the club in the city; design of the place; management of the entrance fees^{xix}; style of music and disc jockeys; promotion (flyers given away during previous parties or left at specific locations, e.g. a fashionable cloths shop or foreign students dormitories at the local universities); financial resources; relationships with the city authorities; friends circles and fame of the managers, owners or DJs; staff management; fashion changes; flow of information the day of the party through mobile phones and Internet forums; reputation of the club; period of the year; and weather conditions.^{xx}

Financial income of the mix

The monthly income of Xiao Deng changed quite a lot according to the number and kind of dance parties he participated in. I estimated it about 4000RMB (US\$482), moving from 15'000 to 20'000 (US\$1'807 to US\$2'409) for a very busy and successful month to zero during calm periods without any opportunity of work (notably during the winter, e.g. Chinese New Year, where people wouldn't go out much). Almost the entire amount of this income came from the mixes and collaborations in the organization of parties with the Japanese promoter, plus very rare additional amounts when he composed a piece of music for an advertisement.

Xiao Deng often complained about the pressure related to the fact he did not have a regular income, and did not know what tomorrow would be. He was personally involved in promotional work, and wasn't happy with that. It consisted of, one day I accompanied him, in going to foreign students' dormitories at the University of Beijing and the Normal University of Beijing (my presence was a plus, because a Caucasian face made easier getting past the security guards at the entrance), running up and down the floors, slipping flyers about a party under the doors of each room. Xiao Deng stressed the fact that such work for dance parties took a lot of time, it was not rare that, after some promotional activities on the very day of the party, he would be completely exhausted when he had to start his mix. He also complained that doing such kind of work didn't let him enough time to write songs.

Looking at the vinyls

Now that I have sketched Xiao Deng's life and djing activities, I would like to present three observations which focus on the agency of his vinyls. Although all three are closely related to the general picture of the mix described above, it is important to note that my goal here is not to seize the activity of mixing but the one of the technical object "vinyls" which constituted only a small part of it. Formulated as a question, the idea here is to understand "what exactly were the vinyls doing?" in the

process of Xiao Deng's mix, in Beijing between 2003 and 2004.

Observation 1: "Xiao Deeenng!!"

It was not rare, when Xiao Deng (or another DJ) mixed at the beginning of a party around 10 or 11 p.m. that no one danced during quite a moment. Most people arrived around midnight, sometimes even later. If there was a competing party the same night at another club --for example with a famous disc jockey from abroad-- the dancefloor could stay empty until 3 a.m. and suddenly, whenever a load of people decided to move from the other club, be overcrowded.

In the absence of a sufficient number of dancers, Xiao Deng's work wasn't very rewarding. The few people present in the club concentrated more on their conversations than on the music, and if a few swayed their hips while drinking, those who crossed the dancefloor did so mostly to greet someone or to go to the toilet. The difference with a crowded dancefloor, some other day, was striking. Xiao Deng then, was the king, he ruled. The people seemed to hang on his gestures: a bad choice of a vinyl and everybody stopped dancing (this situation occurred once in 2004 when he decided to test one of his own songs I helped him to mix where the bass frequencies were badly tuned - by me, that is). A good choice, and the enthusiastic dancers raised their hands, whistled and screamed "XIAOOO DEEENNG!!".

A few hours later, if Xiao Deng was the disc jockey in charge of the last set, and most of the crowd had already left, he would find himself almost alone in the dance hall. The only people still in the club were a few drunkards unable to move, a few unstoppable dancers, employees who already started to clean the place, and a lone researcher who decided to impose on himself to stay until the very last second of the party in order to make sure he did not miss any clue.

At the end of spring 2004, by dint of following Xiao Deng at the parties he mixed, I started to remember the tunes of the vinyls he mixed on a regular basis and, in a general way, his musical feeling through the mix. Every time I went to hear him play, I paid attention to all his movements as well as those of the other participants, DJs, dancers, and the employees of the clubs. One night, a group of regular customers was present, among them a guy -- let's call him Guo -- I knew a little bit since we had chattered a few times. He was an enthusiastic dancer, often in the middle of the dancefloor, making lots of gestures and shouts. As I was standing nearby, and that he and I were behind a group of tall people which prevented us to see the dj-desk, Guo raised up his arms and shouted "XIAOOO DEEENNG!!". The problem, --as I knew for having noticed the change a few minutes earlier when I was closer to the dj-desk--, was that *it was not Xiao Deng who was mixing*, but the second disc jockey who had just started his two hours' set.

Guo was no musician, and probably paid less attention than me to the slight changes of the songs mixed by the DJs, but his mistake was even more striking in that I wouldn't have been able either, -- if I hadn't seen the change with my own eyes --, to hear that it was not Xiao Deng who was mixing. The current record was not one of Xiao Deng's favorites, but it could have been a song I had never heard, for example a new one he had just bought, because it did not sound very different from his usual style. It could also have been, (although I don't think that was the case here), a vinyl from Xiao Deng but temporarily used by the second DJ in order to manage the transition to his own collection of records.

Before commenting this observation, I present two other cases.

Observation 2: Disc jockey without Records

Here is an excerpt of a discussion I had in Shanghai with an European disc jockey, as related in my field notes (translated from French).

[Shanghai, the 2nd of February 2003] (...) I stayed until the end, around 7 a.m. [The German DJ] mixed from midnight to about 4.30 p.m., he was very good. Then Marc took over, and he was also really good, I was surprised because usually Marc is not that good. I said it to Ken who (...) commented (...) 'Yes, Marc has very good records.'

This comment, which I find interesting because of how it links the work of a disc jockey to the quality of his records, can be linked to a situation I observed in Beijing at the beginning of July 2004: Zheng Dao, a well-known and much appreciated Beijing DJ (previously mentioned in the section *The Audience at the parties*), went on tour to Europe. While he was playing in Zurich, he unfortunately had his DJ bag with eighty-six of his best records stolen (as my grandpa said, Switzerland is not what it used to be). I had heard him mixing at a party a few days before his departure, and I went to listen to his set again when he came back to Beijing. The difference was huge: a few weeks before, his mix had many astonishing sounds, subtle rhythmic changes, and I had seen an audience literally in trance, subdued by the music. That evening --a few weeks later, after his bag had been stolen-- his mix was poor, flat sounds and rhythms that sounded old fashioned, even a little bit steely, and his performance clearly did not fascinate the audience. Emotions set aside (Zheng Dao wasn't very happy to play his "old" records), the relationship between him and his vinyls looked suddenly very special to me in the following months when, his stock of vinyls slowly being reconstituted, his mixes were getting better and better again. As a DJ, he was, in a way, his records.

Of course, things aren't that simple. However, from the technical perspective which is the core of this paper, it is interesting to note that a good DJ is, in the example above, a DJ who has good records. A disc jockey who does not have good records becomes, somehow, until he gets them back, a bad disc jockey. In other words, records, and their content, are part of the artistic quality of the disc jockey.

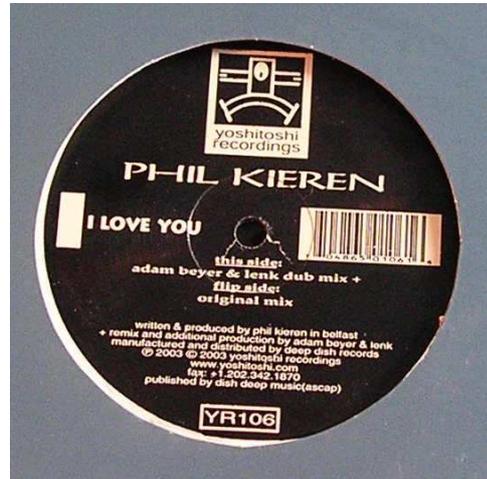
Observation 3: Records, without disc jockey

As mentioned earlier, Xiao Deng's sets usually last about two hours. I also explained that he often went to clubs two to three hours in advance, and had a few beers at the bar, waiting for his turn to play. When he had drunk a lot, he sometimes needed to leave the dj-desk during his mix in order to go to the toilets. To do so, he put a record on one of the turn-tables, synchronized it to the previous one, performed the mix and let the record play. The average length of the songs being around seven minutes, he had enough time to do his round-trip to the restroom.

Although I have never observed Guo or anyone shouting "Xiaooo Deeenng" while he was away, it could as well have happened; to the question "who is playing now?", the answer goes: "*the record* is playing".

Is a DJ with Good Records a Good DJ?

Let us have a look at one of the vinyls. The picture below was taken at Xiao Deng's place, in June 2004.



Figures 3a & 3b

As anyone with good eyes or a magnifying glass can see on the lower part of the enlargement on the right, this record was “*written & produced by phil kieren in belfast*”. It was probably not the one used by Xiao Deng in the observations presented before, but since it was one in his collection, it could as well have been the case. Phil Kieren can help us understand what is going on with the technical object “vinyl” in the process of a DJ mix if we use the advice provided by Bruno Latour (1988):

(...) every time you want to know what a nonhuman does, simply imagine what other humans or other nonhumans would have to do were this character not present.” (p. 299)

For clarity's sake, let's consider from now on that the record played in each of the three preceding observations was this one -- “I Love You”, from Phil Kieren--, and let's call it “Bob” to make a difference with its numerous clones sold in various places around the DJ world (a vinyl of this type is usually produced in hundreds or thousands).

Bob's actions have already been brought to the foreground in the three preceding observations: 1. Guo shouts at Xiao Deng, but he has been replaced by another DJ. Guo cannot notice his absence because the music he hears is Bob's, not Xiao Deng's; 2. Zheng Dao has his eighty-six best records stolen, and becomes a “bad” DJ until his collection is reconstituted. This story tells us how much Bob is needed on the stage: while he is stuck in Zurich, Zheng Dao struggles to find a substitute for him and the quality of the show is temporarily weakened; 3. Xiao Deng goes to the toilets and does not worry about the music, because Bob takes care of the crowd while he is away.

As we saw earlier, Xiao Deng's status, while mixing in a club, changed according to circumstances. Whenever the audience was small, no one seemed to care that a DJ was behind the dj-desk, carefully choosing records, adding subtle

changes to the music. A few hours later, when the dance hall was overcrowded, Xiao Deng became a star, many eyes were fixed on him and the very same movements which had gone unnoticed before were suddenly very important to all. Now of course, things are not that simple: if one wants to grasp the “importance” of a disc jockey in a club in Beijing, he or she must also consider his or her fame (famous DJs usually played at the best schedule), the day of the week (Tuesday was very different from Thursday, Thursday being also different from Friday or Saturday), in which club and with which audience, the personality of the DJ (e.g. exuberant or not), the choice of the records played (a famous song, appreciated by many created different reactions in the audience), and so on. But still, in a way, in the description above, we can say that the number of people in the room determined whether Xiao Deng’s work mattered or not.

Considering the very same process, Bob’s situation is not very different from Xiao Deng’s. Its agency varies according to circumstances. A close (and slightly obstinate) look at it helps us understand the shape of Bob’s actions, as we try to follow its path. The first thing to note is probably that Bob had indeed a long journey: born in Belfast, he is now living in Beijing. In the process of the mix, his activity is strangely similar to Xiao Deng’s. At first, still in the DJ bag, Bob doesn’t do anything. No one cares of him, and he could as well be elsewhere (at Xiao Deng’s home, in Belfast, in the toilets?). Then, picked up by Xiao Deng, carefully placed on the second turn-table, being slowly mixed with the preceding record Bob becomes suddenly an important agent in the flow of interactions. He is collaborating with the second record, the dj mixer effects, and Xiao Deng, to produce a suitable output for the dancers, in a similar way as the different members of a rock band play together on a stage. Then, when the mix between the preceding record and Bob has been operated by Xiao Deng, Bob is alone at the dj-desk. Xiao Deng is behind, looking for the next vinyl to be played. All the music, the subtle changes provided by Bob and transmitted to the crowd are but the product of Phil Kieren’s (and many other musicians, sound engineers, etc.) *recorded*, indeed, activity.

Conclusion

The point I would like to emphasize here is Xiao Deng’s action of *use*. While we see how the flow of agencies during the DJ mix made the artist move from the background to the foreground and return, it is the fact that “Bob” is being *used* or *not used* by Xiao Deng that makes him *active* or *not active* in the overall movement. For the ethnographer, *the moment of use* brings into play the agency of the technical tool in the social world. Of course, the idea of “use” here is meant in a very broad sense. For example, in the case of someone who has just bought a new music player, or a mobile phone, the simple fact of carrying the device in one’s bag already induces agency, because it changes its owner’s feelings of oneself (by enhancing the perception of her social status for example). In another way, e.g. carried in the hand but not switched on, it could change the visual appearance of the owner, making her look more fashionable in the eyes of others. Switched on, it would, then, have a strong agency, cutting the user from its local audio environment, or connecting her to someone situated in a distant place.

How and what the technical object plays are, of course, the next questions^{xxi}. But while these last two points go beyond the scope of this paper, I believe, as I have tried to illustrate above, that the question of *the moment of use* is central when one wants to describe the agency of technical objects, -- a kind of agency which is often, at first, invisible to the eyes of the observer. It gives the observer a hint that a new

agency comes into play: if an object is being used, it has necessarily agency, and this agency must necessarily be taken into the broader ethnographical account.

So is a DJ with good records a good DJ? Certainly not. If that was the case, everyone who can buy records could become a famous artist. Bob, although obviously not quite innocent in Beijing's mixes, is always taken hostage by Xiao Deng, who decides whether or not he will play on stage with his other, human and non-human, comrades. However, if the DJ remains the one who is in charge, we see that this "being-in-charge" changes a lot throughout the mixing process, where so many actions are taken off the artist's mind by technical devices.

Endnotes

- i This paper gives a detailed description of collected data and does not discuss in depth theoretical issues related to the agency of technical objects. However, Akrich (1987), Latour (1988), Callon (1986), while unknown to me before and during the field work, had indeed a strong influence on the way I present the data today. For a recent publication on the agency of objects see also Latour (2005: 63-86); for a discussion on the agency of artefacts in art, including the works of art themselves, see Gell (1998).
- ii A PDF version of the original thesis --in French-- is available in Zimmermann (2006).
- iii As for the question concerning the relationship between the West and China in matters of technical innovation, see Cao (2004).
- iv If all the local DJs I have seen in 2001 were men, some interviewees mentioned a few women who were djing too. I did not encounter any of them until the summer 2005, however.
- v This idea is discussed in Latour (2005: 81).
- vi As far as I understand the promotional work, the places were chosen because of their potential customers: the bars and the shops were trendy places where clubbers would go during the week, and the foreign student community often came to the clubs too. However, regular Chinese university students, and ordinary bars or shops in the city were not considered as potential customers. In 2003-2004, when I spoke about my research at Beijing University, none of my Chinese colleagues (master and doctoral students at the Department of Sociology) had been in a club in Beijing even once in their life.
- vii Xiao Deng told me he used to have a strong interest in the practice of scratch some years ago, but he eventually gave up doing exercises. This decision was, I think, linked to the act he considered himself as a *techno* artist; scratch is usually the privilege of *hip hop*, and the special effect achieved by altering the speed of the turn-table is mostly done on vocal sounds (*techno*, in general, does not have human vocals, contrary to *hip hop*).
- viii I did not make any comparative observations with Western DJs (an environment that I am not familiar with), but most of the elements presented here such as the description of the mixing-activity process, the importance of the audience, or the number of vinyls chosen by the artists for an event are similar to those of Jouvenet (2001).
- ix In Chinese only as a noun, "a *mix*" (mix, 一个mix *yige mix*). In the verbal form, the usual saying was more "put music" (放音乐 *fang yinyue* or 搭接 *dajie*).

- x On the “the quest for the right piece [of music] at the right moment” or sociology of taste and the question of locations and moments, see the enlightening *Dora’s failed interview* in Hennion (2007: 110-111).
- xi In August 2005, when I was staying at his home, Xiao Deng had decided to use his laptop computer for mixing, using Native Instruments’ *Traktor* software and mp3 files. He told me he did no longer buy many vinyls, but was still following the procedure described here, not sending his Japanese friend to buy records for him but looking himself for mp3s on the Internet by means of peer-to-peer software (i.e. a cost-free and illegal way). When I asked him if it worked well, he said: “The songs of this website [that you can see now on this label’s website on my computer screen], most of the time [I] can find all of them.” (这个网站的那些歌, 基本上都能找到。 *Zhei ge wangzhan de nei xie ge, jibenshang dou neng zhaodao*)
- xii Unfortunately I have lost this model’s reference. I believe they were professional quality headphones, quite standard, probably worth less than 125 €.
- xiii In 2003-2004, a fetishist party in Beijing was an event where most of the audience would dress in black and white, with various sadomasochist costumes but with a bon-enfant atmosphere.
- xiv For example, during the World University Games handled in Beijing in 2001, many additional Westerners came to the clubs. A similar phenomenon can be observed every summer, when the Chinese language courses for foreigners start at Beijing universities.
- xv This aspect may be changing with the spread of the Internet: in March 2004, I saw Xiao Deng mixing in his room in Beijing for someone who was in the Guangdong province, using software that allowed him to see his friend, who had a video camera (Xiao Deng did not have one himself, so he was only transmitting sound information). Some international artists are already giving long-distance concerts by means of this type of technology (e.g. the German band Monolake <<http://www.monolake.de>>).
- xvi Fictitious name.
- xvii These words, in Chinese, are a direct allusion to another very common saying in PRC: “Serve the people” 为人民服务 *Wei renmin fuwu*.
- xviii One must note here that Zheng Dao was addressing me, a Western musician who had just listened to his set. Although his remark inscribes itself in a set of problems I have observed several times, it is possible that it was also a way of telling me why he mixed one particular kind of music instead of another, some songs being sometimes considered by disc jockeys as “easy to mix” and others less so, indicating the ability of each artist to use more difficult materials or not. Xiao Deng sometimes referred to this kind of “easy” songs using the terms of “music pleasant to the ear” 好听的音乐 *haoting de yinyue*.
- xix The musicians who were regulars at the clubs I visited didn’t pay the entrance fee of dance events (which could vary between 30RMB and 50RMB). Once I had been acquainted with them, I never paid a single entrance ticket again. When I arrived to a club, I looked for someone I knew (an employee, someone in the audience) who then informed the security guards, saying, for example, “friend of Xiao Deng” 小邓的朋友 *Xiao Deng de pengyou*. I then got a stamp on my wrist (a common trick used to distinguish among the people going in and out, those who had already paid their ticket from those who had not), and I got in.
- xx Dance parties in Beijing, at least those I have observed, were playing a very obvious role as a “meeting place” for a certain kind of community. Musicians

were but a subgroup of a corpus which included personalities from the movie industry, video and design artists, and many others. Many work discussions (contracts, projects, collaborations, etc.) were taking place in the clubs in a systematic way. This characteristic of Beijing clubs was particularly striking by the fact that if many professionals of the entertainment industry were attending the dance parties every Friday and Saturdays nights, many were not dancing (especially DJs; recently I have made this funny observation --“disc jockeys don't dance” -- in clubs in Geneva as well), were not flirting, but were talking business.

xxi For a discussion in French on these two other points, see Zimmermann (2006).

Acknowledgments

I thank Nicolas Zufferey, Ellen Hertz, Michael Lackner and Howard S. Becker for their invaluable help during the past few years; Qiu Zeqi for constructive discussions and criticism at various stages of the research project and for the invitation to join his team of postgraduate students at the Department of Sociology of Beijing University during the academic year 2003-2004; André Ducret, for teaching me Sociology of art; Deng Suo and Zhang Yan (at the time Ph.D. candidates, Department of Sociology of Beijing University), for useful suggestions while discussing the theoretical analysis; Caroline Grillot for guiding my steps at the very beginning of my field research; Mareile Flitsch and Antoine Hennion, for crucial advice and kindness at difficult times during the writing of my thesis; Andrej Seàn O'Murchù for comments on this paper and helping me improve my English; Vanessa L. Vanpetten for her interest in this discussion while still at the pre-alpha stage. The financial support of the Swiss National Science Foundation under grant PBGE 1 101317 is gratefully acknowledged.

References

- Akrich, Madeleine (1987) “Comment décrire les objets techniques?” *Techniques et culture* 9: 49-63.
- (1992) “The De-Description of Technical Objects.” Pp. 205-224 in *Shaping technology - building society: studies in sociotechnical change* edited by W. Bijker and J. Law. Cambridge and London: MIT Press.
- Becker, Howard S. (1973) *Outsiders: Studies in the sociology of deviance*. New York: Free Press.
- (1982) *Art Worlds*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- (1998) *Tricks of the Trade: How to Think about Your Research While You're Doing It*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Callon, Michel (1986) “Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St Briec Bay.” Pp. 196-229 in *Power, Action and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge* edited by J. Law. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Cao, Cong (2004) “L'industrie chinoise face au défi technologique: Les investisseurs étrangers sont les premiers pourvoyeurs de technologies.” *Perspectives Chinoises* 83: 4-17.

- (2004) "Challenges for Technological Development in China's Industry: Foreign investors are the main providers of technology." *China Perspectives* 54: 4-17.
- Corbin, Juliet and Anselm Strauss (1998) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. London: Sage Publications.
- Gell, Alfred (1998) *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- Hennion, Antoine (2007) "Those Things That Hold Us Together: Taste and Sociology." *Cultural Sociology* 1: 97-111.
- Jouvenet, Morgan (2001) "Emportés par le mix." *Terrain*, Numéro 37 - Musique et emotion: 45-60.
- Latour, Bruno (1988) "Mixing Humans and NonHumans Together: The Sociology of a Door-Closer." *Social Problems* 35-3: 298-310.
- (2005) *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Clarendon Lectures in Management Studies). Oxford University Press, USA.
- Zimmermann, Basile (2006) "De l'impact de la technologie occidentale sur la culture chinoise: les pratiques des musiciens électroniques à Pékin comme terrain d'observation de la relation entre objets techniques et création artistique." Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Chinese Studies, University of Geneva, Switzerland. Online PDF available via the *Cyberthèses* service. (<http://www.unige.ch/cyberdocuments/theses2006/ZimmermannB/meta.html>)

Citation

- Zimmermann, Basile (2007) "Tracing the Action of Technical Objects in an Ethnography: Vinyls in Beijing." *Qualitative Sociology Review*, Vol. III Issue 3. Retrieved Month, Year (http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php)