

Culminating Experience Reflective Paper

It has been a very eventful year and a truly wonderful experience to be working on my Culminating Experience project. I completed a business plan on launching a music consultancy business after graduation.

Concept and Expectations

Before I came to Berklee, I started the foundation work of a company called Six Suns Music that I set up in Hong Kong. I knew that I wanted to be working in the music business but I had no idea about the exact business model. My understanding about the music industry was quite vague from an outsider's perspective. I knew I had to look for talents to work with and develop partnerships to grow the business but the direction of the business was unclear.

In the fall semester of 2015, I took a few important classes that were very helpful in shaping my understanding of the music market. I gained a much more in-depth knowledge on how the music industry is run together. I had opportunities to interact with guests from many different professional backgrounds: artist managers, record labels, music publishers, distributors as well as entrepreneurs from Music Business Seminar. It is essential to be familiar with who are the big players and influencers in the music industry. In

October 2015, I reached out to Pete Dyson, our instructor of Contract Management for some advice on developing the initial idea on a business plan to be suitable to the Chinese market. As an entertainment lawyer for decades, Pete is very experienced in working in the music industry. In recent years, he also studied the recent development on the Chinese market. He suggested me on looking into social media management for western artists to the Chinese audience. I was very inspired from our discussion and it marked the beginning of formalising a new business idea for Six Suns Music.

Plan of Action and Process

Throughout the year, I had spoken to many people to engage their interests and opinions on my business idea. I was able to identify a huge gap between the Western artists and the Chinese market. A lot of foreigners, especially the ones who have never been to China, learned about China mostly via media and their friends. Their understanding of China as a country seems limited. The Western media has not been entirely friendly about the China and also tends to put weight on negative political and social issues. However, I was happy to discover that most of the people I spoke to are very open-minded and want to learn more about the recent development in China, not just from the economic perspective but also from a social and political perspective.

They recognized the size and potential of the market. Even though China is now the second largest economy in the world, it remains isolated to the outside world socially and culturally. My conversations enhanced my belief that there needs to be a business mechanism which can effectively cater these needs while serving the purpose of a cultural bridge between China and the outside world.

One wonderful thing about being at Berklee is that you will never know whom you get to meet. I was very lucky to get introduced to the co-founder of Rhapsody of Fire, a prominent Italian power metal band at a social occasion. I had never really listened to any metal music at that point and was completely new to the genre. My conversation with the rock star was very casual and it was just like two new people get to know each other as friends. I later on discovered how important Rhapsody of Fire has been in the metal world, with an international presence including China. I learned that the band toured in China in 2010 but they did not actually have much follow up. My curious mind pushed me to do some more research to find out who they really are and what they mean to the Chinese fans. I presented to the band a "China Market Presence" study that had very surprising results:

- 1) Rhapsody of Fire have been in China since late 1990s;
- 2) They are the introducer of metal music to a lot of Chinese metal lovers;

3) They have over tens of thousands fans spread across all over China.

The discovery however seemed to be entirely news to the band as they had never studied what happened in China before. They were even surprised to find out that they had an established fan base already in the Far East. I was told that only a few hundred people attended their concert in China when they were there and the promoter didn't actually share much information and the follow up was quite poor. They were completely disconnected from their fans in China (also because most of the foreign social media sites are blocked in China). I also quickly realised that promoters tend to be more event-focused and they are not able to provide certain artist-related services similar to an artist management company. It has been extremely difficult for Rhapsody of Fire because the band has gone through a lot of changes over the past years. The type of services catered to bring the artists and fans closer is not provided to Rhapsody of Fire. It doesn't fall into the responsibility of either the label company or the booking agency, nor the promoters. The band also had been operating without a manager for years.

To test the market, Six Suns Music and Rhapsody of Fire entered into an agreement on Chinese social media management service via Weibo.com (Facebook equivalent). The primary aim is to bring together their fans in China who have been spread across different online communities or lost in the years.

We shortlisted a few sites that we should be primarily focusing on looking for fans, such as Xiami Music, NetEase Music, Baidu Forum, etc. We launched the official page on Weibo in March 2016. Our approach has been purely organic, including directly messaging the fans, replying comments on public posts and posting announcements in public forums. As of June 2016, we have slowly grown the fan base from zero to over 300. Even though the number seems very small, we were able to identify and draw conclusions on the fan demographics, behaviours, music tastes, life styles, etc. Meanwhile, I also developed a personal interest to power metal music, which is a completely new world to me.

Findings and Next Steps

There are a few very interesting facts that we learned from the fans:

- 1) Rhapsody of Fire's songs have been infringed by a very big internet company in an iOS game that is widely popular in China;
- 2) Their songs are listened over millions of times on Chinese music streaming sites but the band has never received any income from the market;
- 3) The Chinese fans are extremely loyal to the extent that they almost worship the band.

We identified other problems but it seemed really difficult to find solutions. The band also doesn't have the financial resources to pay high legal fees to investigate copyright infringement issues. Meanwhile, their labels or publishers do not seem very active on dealing with the problems in China. Maybe in the past, no one really cared because China was deemed as a global pirate house. However, the IP environment has drastically changed in the past few years. This fact on the other hand, is not yet well known overseas. I then also see that besides the social media management services Six Suns can provide to its artists, it can also provide consultant services that will enhance copyright protection in China.

In the Emerging Business Practicum in Spring 2016, I further refine my business idea after some more market research. As highlighted in my business plan, artists might not be willing to pay too much upfront to enter into a market before they know for sure that there can be some return in the future. There needs to be a balance between how much one can charge and then monetize the fan base from the future. Our direct-to-fan marketing strategy serves as a market introduction and education but the economic benefit might come much down the line the future. It is essential to manage the expectations with the artists Six Suns will be working with. Our clients need to understand that they are in the market for a long-term and they need to be

patient. For Six Suns, it is also important to look for initial capital investment to support the company's operation in the beginning.

Throughout the year, I have continued to make good connections with business professionals in the music industry, such as Ed Peto, managing director of Outdustry, a Beijing-based music consultancy that represents Western labels in China. During MIDEM, I was introduced to Alibaba Music Group, one of the biggest players in the Chinese market. Alibaba gave a very positive feedback on my proposal of being a cultural ambassador, who can provide valuable insight to western professionals who want to know more about the China market and vice versa. I will continue to explore these relationships upon graduation including working on small projects together to launch one or few artists together with these businesses in China.

Contribution and Personal Impact

China's music industry is undergoing a very rapid growth. There is not just a big demand for musicians, but also a huge demand (if not bigger) for qualified producers, engineers, songwriters, arrangers, business managers and etc. The market is still young and significantly lacks music professionals who have adequate music knowledge and industry expertise. There will be many

collaboration opportunities arising between the West and East in the near future.

My passion really is to help build bridges between different music markets and between artists and fans. I view Six Suns Music as a platform and a vehicle to help talents from inside and outside China to connect easily, overcoming the language and cultural barrier. In the short-run, the company will be focusing on bringing foreign artists into China, but in five to ten years time, there will be more Chinese artists traveling overseas to perform. I would like my company to be ready to serve Chinese artists when that time comes as well.