

Skateboarding Subculture in China: Development Path, Characteristics and Representation of Values and Social Change

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Abstract

In China youth subcultures were long located out of the public eye. Only over the last thirty years, due to their rapid development, they drew greater popular attention. One of the reasons behind the growth of youth subcultures in China is the Internet. The Internet constitutes a convenient communication platform for the creation of discussion boards, finding spiritual and avocation partners, and for a free exchange of ideas. During the last few years skateboarding subculture has become increasingly popular. Originating in the United States, this youth subculture is experiencing the phenomenon of globalization, which reflects not only the generation gap, but also embodies a hidden appeal to escape the shackles of society and transform existing values. For instance, one of the basic values that skateboarders pursue both in the United States and China is a sense of freedom. Yet the meaning of freedom differs in China. The elder age of the participants compared to the United States, the special attitudes towards youth in China, the strong influence of tradition, family and social pressure, and other factors all contribute to its different perception. Based on interviews with skateboarders in Beijing this research provides a valuable insight into the local characteristics of China's skateboarding subculture; specifically its development path, reasons for popularity, and the transformation of values amongst the contemporary Chinese youth.

Keywords: China, youth subculture, skateboarding, transformation of values, shackles, social and family pressure

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Introduction

The topic of skateboarding subculture is new both in the Chinese academic circles and in the international sinological environment. The questions I would like to raise in this research are: How has the skateboarding subculture developed in China? What happened to the skateboarding culture in the Chinese environment? And which value transformation we can reveal in representatives of this youth subculture? Undoubtedly, youth value change can be revealed through other subcultures and there is valuable research that has been dedicated to youth subcultures (Clark, 2012), its development in the context of social change (Lu Yulin, 2007, Wang Hansong, 1997) and the change of values among the youth. (Qiu Ji & Wang Yi, Wang Weiwei, 2012) Skateboarding is not included among prior research in this field, and is almost never mentioned as a subculture. Moreover, there is no academic research that deals with skateboarding subculture in China.

What are the reasons for the lack of research in this field? First of all, due to many restrictions in previous periods, subculture is a relatively new phenomenon for China. Youth subcultures started to develop mainly after the Economic Reform and started to spread fast only after the coming of the Internet Era. Secondly, probably, as skateboarders in China is in quantity proportion to the young population quite low, thus draws less attention in comparison to, for example, the Anime subculture. Thirdly, many Chinese specialists regard skateboarding not as a subculture but as a sport. Due to these reasons, information regarding skateboarders and the skateboarding subculture that I provide in this article is based on my own field research. The *Observation Method* and the *Structured Interview Method* were applied in this research.

Basic information for my research was gathered during a few occasions, including some competitions among long-board skaters in *Wenquanmiaopu* village (April 2014), World Skateboarding day in Beijing (June, 2014) and special interviews in skateshops. The interviews can be divided into two types, the first one was mainly held to understand special values in the skateboarding subculture, local characteristics according to the Chinese environment “rules”, the value change among the young Chinese skateboarders, and their behavior. In this interview the respondents were asked a wide range of questions (around thirty questions) starting from their profession, family background and ending with life approach, life goal, worldview, family relations and others. This type of interview helped uncover the whole picture of the contemporary youth skateboarding world. The second type of interview was a much longer interview that aimed to understand the development of skateboarding subculture in the cultural heart of China – Beijing, and to connect it with the historical background. There were around fifteen broad topics, and the questions mainly related to general information about skateboarding subculture in China, its development, and the respondents’ impressions. In total I conducted 18 interviews in Chinese, ranging from fourteen to sixty-two minutes. Additional information was obtained from the analyses of blogs and special websites for the Chinese skateboarders. So here I represent a brief quality analysis of it.

The Development Path of Skateboarding Subculture in China

Skateboarding as a new way of entertainment entered China approximately in 1985. Nevertheless, it started to develop into a subculture a few years later in 1989-1990. As one of the first generation skateboarders mentioned, probably there were very few people skating before, but they were doing it alone rather than in groups. So around the year of 1989 a group of the Chinese skateboarders consisting of around thirty people started to gather in the *Gongzhufen* area in Beijing. The analyses on interviews with the elder generation of Chinese Skateboarders and website analyses shows that the film called «*Gleaming the Cube*» shown in 90-s at the Chinese television played a very important role in the development of the Chinese skateboarding subculture. Main characters were represented by American skateboarding stars, and showed many skateboarding tricks that of course attracted the young Chinese people. The others sources of information were foreign students skating in China and the Chinese people who studied abroad and got the information about skateboarding culture outside of China.

To understand the skateboarders of this time we should first understand the historical and cultural background of this time. The Cultural Revolution had just passed, entertainment matters were just developing, as was mentioned by a first generation skater: “television, audio cassettes, novels, were pretty boring for the young people and they wanted something else”. The development of skateboarding subculture took a long time at first because it required a strong material base, the skateboard itself cost the average of three months’ salary and was hard to obtain, and nowadays you get two or three for the same price. Another issue was the shortage of information: skateboarders shared video-cassettes between themselves, and they watched each cassette many times. One more containment to the development for the subculture was a public opinion and the dominating culture positions, which had regarded activity in subgroups as still inappropriate for “good” youth. Later on, with the new internet-era, new approaches to subcultures, and the new material abilities have contributed to the development of the skateboarding subculture.

Comparison between interviews of the first generation skateboarders and younger generations shows that while the first ones experienced a very slow introduction into the subculture, the younger ones easily obtained information about the tricks, lifestyle, and world views that made it easier to enter the skateboarding subgroup, cooperate, gather and organize activities. The skateboarders of the older generation who have been interviewed not only stayed in subculture circles but also brought the subculture to a new level by selling the skates and promoting the skateboarding lifestyle, and by creating a positive image of skateboarding. For example, one of them mentioned that he never smokes while skating because he was afraid that it might be perceived as a drawback of the skateboarding style.

Nowadays, skateboarding culture (and also snowboarding) even has the government support. Skateboarding has just started to experience commercialization process as it is strongly promoted on the Internet. Big skate parks and a skate school were established recently in China. Information, strong promotion in media, and government investment and support show us that in the future skateboarding subculture probably will broaden the frames and will allow the involvement of many youngsters in this lifestyle.

Characteristics of Skateboarding Subculture in China

Though subculture and youth culture seems to be a relatively new thing in China, I would say it is yet a small version of “imported” culture with foreign characteristics and values which comes through the process of assimilation and globalization in China. In the USA – the homeland of skateboarding, it is supposed to be an adolescence culture, covering the age of eight to twenty-two, mainly the period of children’s rebellion. In China the average age of a skateboarder is twenty-two to twenty-six. The elder age of skateboarders can be explained by the fact of the high risk of injuries skateboarding involves. As many of young skaters are single children, they experience strong care by their parents. Moreover, medical insurance in China cannot fully cover bone fractures, wounds and other injuries, which also purposes a challenge to the material background of the participants. Therefore skateboarding is not easy to be approved by the Chinese parents. Yet another issue is the influence of the family over the person; family values, the opinion of elder generations is still very important for the Chinese and in most cases the children won’t do anything against their wish.

Finally, the life of the Chinese child before entering university is completely devoted to his or her studies: the pressure to be the first in class, gain the best results, and enter the best university reduces entertainment to a minimum. It is obvious that as soon as they enter universities and don’t live together with their parents, they also enter a relatively “free” period of life. Although, as noted by one of the first generation skaters who has a skate business: “because of the high pressure on students during their studies many youngsters used to the pressure so they are not likely to entertain themselves, thus it is very hard to promote it”. Another young skater, a PhD student mentioned that his classmates spend the whole day in the library and are afraid to go out and entertain themselves because they will feel guilty about it.

Many of respondents of my interviews in skateboarding subculture seemed to be “*panni*”, which means rebellious in Chinese, and introduced great problems, even conflicts with parents, but not all of the young respondents acknowledged themselves as rebellious. The direct reason of conflicts with parents lies in the great generation gap between the people born before and after The Economic Reform.

If we turn to a detailed background of specific characteristics of skateboarding subculture in the Chinese environment, it can be mentioned that even in our days skateboarding lifestyle is still not easily approved by many representatives of an elder generation, the participation in this subculture is often noted as infantile. One of the most significant reasons is a spiritual misunderstanding between skaters and their parents that reveals that the parents’ generation stuck to materialist values while the children had already started to turn their mind towards post-materialist thinking, and try to meet their spiritual needs. According the recent research this kind of people represent a minority in Chinese society. (Guo Lian, 2010) As mentioned by one of my respondents: “my parents care about whether I eat well or if I get good results, they absolutely do not care my spiritual condition.”

Representation of Values and Social Change

“Skateboarding is so much more than just a physical act, it is a way of thinking, doing and living.” (Somers, 2010). It is interesting to reveal the value change from traditional to modern among the Chinese representatives of this subculture. One of the key values and basic appeals in skateboarding subculture is a freedom. (Slee, 2011) Freedom basically means the releasing of shackles. What does it mean in the American subculture? Firstly, freedom from rules, unlike the traditional sports, you can use any manner of skating you want to. Secondly, it means the existence of personal freedom. In China, in general adults try to control much of adolescent activities and free time (Slee, 2011). Interviews of young skateboarders revealed that in China the meaning of freedom for skateboarders is much broader than expected and have yet further explanations for these appeals. Interviews show that freedom for Chinese skaters means feeling free to integrate in skateboarder’s group, free from family and society shackles, feeling free from many traditions, free from thinking what others think, and free from constant pressure.

The skateboarding culture also shows a strong tendency of the participants in the subculture towards individualism. First of all, this subculture provides a platform for the youth to represent themselves, to compete with themselves and to overcome their own possibilities. All of the young generation skaters mentioned that it is the way of their self-identity and self-approval, the way to show their individuality. As described by one of the elder generation skaters, skateboarding is an individualistic and egoistic subculture, because you pursue the wish to show yourself. This statement is further verified in the answers of the respondents about their life approach. For example, when asked the question: “are your parents against your skating? If they were, would you continue doing it?” The respondents were unanimously likely to continue to skate even against the wish of their parents. The respondents showed lower attachment to the tradition and a high concentration on their lives and paid a lot of attention to self-expression and pursue of spiritual needs. Some of the Chinese youth living under the constant pressure of parent’s wishes learned to not follow parents’ blindly but listen to their own hearts, and sometimes neglect the tradition of filial piety. Generally, the youngsters were highly individualistic about governing their lives themselves and trying to escape or neglect the pressure and “shackles” from parents and family.

Due to local environment, skateboarding subculture in China has a broader meaning to one of the main values of skateboarding – freedom. In China the problem of freedom in youth circles is associated with a strong influence of family. It is hard to deny that China recently has been influenced by western values and is experiencing a period of transformation of the value system. There are different ways to affect the values of the Chinese youth; one of it is through the imported modern youth culture that provides a convenient platform for the introduction of a new lifestyle, worldview and more. In the case of the skateboarding subculture, we see a hidden appeal of the youth to changes in the relations with family, gain freedom from their hold and release from the burden of modern Chinese education, we see strong tendencies to stress individuality and searching of self-identity.

Conclusion

The development of skateboarding culture in China since the Economic Reform didn't really change the subculture itself but experienced different periods of relations with the dominating culture and society members. Nowadays we can say that it stands to the path of smooth development. Informatization, spreading of media, a beginning process of commercialization of skateboarding subculture and the strengthening of the material base among the young people has contributed to it greatly. Skateboarding subculture, being a foreign product couldn't be brought to China in its pure form. The main contradictions were met in family relations, strong influence of tradition, and approach towards entertainment for children, educational and even medical system. However American youth subculture brought to China many western values as individuality and individual lifestyle, youth entertainment culture that obviously got wide support among the Chinese youngsters and the existence of skateboarders itself proves the value changes and youth appeal to these changes. As the Chinese children have to study hard, foreign teenagers can experience many new things. Within the impact of western values the influence of the family institution is reducing. More and more Chinese try to escape everyday pressure, show their individuality and personality and skateboarding subculture provides the platform to do it.

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