

Exploring Subculture in China: Punk and Resistance

Jian Xiao, Loughborough University, UK

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Abstract

This paper focuses on subcultural resistance, with a specific focus on punk subculture in China. The highly contested concept of subculture has generated much debate among Anglo-American scholars for decades, which has in turn influenced the subcultural studies in other countries. Drawing on a three-month ethnographic research, it is argued that subcultural resistance requires an exploration of the relation between resistance and the individual biographies of subcultural members. The biography of one punk informant is chosen to illustrate the social dynamics of punk resistance. Essentially, the formats of individual resistance, collective resistance and the discourse of resistance happen at different stages of an individual's time as a subcultural member and reveal the dynamic relationship between the individual biography and subcultural resistance.

Keywords: Subcultural resistance, individual biography, frame of reference, resistance discourse

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Introduction

The sophistication of punk subculture has generated many discussions in different countries and led to explorations in several aspects in academia. Starting from Dick Hebdige (1979), the cultural meaning of punk style was explored. Current scholars make efforts to discuss punk phenomena in Russia, Indonesia and Poland, relating to the themes of anarchism, identity and resistance (Dunn, 2012; Cherry and Mellins, 2012; Gololobov and Steinholt, 2012). In 1994, western punk style music together with its cultural meanings has imported into China. According to 'An Introduction of Punk History' (2011), China's first punker He Yong emerged in Beijing and the first two punk bands *Underbaby* and *Catcher in the Rye* emerged soon after.

Unlike academics in many other countries, Chinese academics have largely downplayed the history and status quo of punk subculture, despite its vibrant development over the past nearly 20 years. As a result, the related previous discussions that can be identified are relatively few. In Wang's (2007) thesis, hardcore punk is believed to retain only some aspects of subculture. The question arose in DeHart's article (2013) of whether or not authentic punk can flourish only in an oppressive environment such as China. The importance of subculture has been shown in relevant subcultural studies and exploration is necessary to identify the challenges brought by non-mainstream subcultures to the current mainstream in China.

Defining Subculture

From the early research conducted by the Chicago school to the latest model established by J. Patrick Williams, with a review of how subculture theories are applied to the Chinese context by Chinese scholars, the concept of subculture is constantly changing from class-based to mundane life-based to interest-based. The debates involve how to situate subcultures in a social context and if the meaning of subcultures is solely to resist. Post-subculturalists argue that society is fragmented and that subcultural practices are unrelated to the concept of resistance. The CCCS and J. Patrick Williams both emphasise the differentiating process and the resistance acts in subcultures in a society.

While the CCCS model directly theorises the oppositional relationship between the mainstream culture and subcultures, Williams replaces the term "mainstream" society with "normal" society. By reframing a rigid framework which essentially begins with class from an outsider's viewpoint, Williams' approaches, which start from interest and interaction networks of subcultural members, who are not limited to a particular social category, attempt to examine the concept of performance in subcultural practices as well as paying attention to a social context which may need more explanation than simply applying the concept of socio-economic class.

Williams' conceptualisation of subculture is applied since its flexibility allows more possibilities in terms of research directions. Williams' (2011:39) definition of subculture refers to "*culturally bounded, but not closed, networks of people who come to share the meaning of specific ideas, material objects, and practices through interaction*", leading to their identifying themselves different from "*the normal society*".

A Theory of Subcultural Resistance

From another perspective, the subculturists' self-identifying as different from "*the normal society*" is achieved by their refusal to follow the society rules "for simplicity's sake" (Williams, 2011:88). A focus on the analysis of power further leads to the concepts of exertion and resistance, explaining the subculturalists practices in relation to the social system. Resistance is then given an important role in Williams' subculture model in understanding the intentions of subcultural members.

A theory of subcultural resistance is developed by Williams, in contrast to the diverse discussions of (ir) relevance of resistance in subcultures in previous subcultural studies, where resistance is simplified as no more than a feature of some subculture. Williams provides a critique of the one-dimensional application of the concept of resistance in the previous subcultural studies; nevertheless he does not refuse to include symbolic resistance from CCCS to explain passive resistance. Specifically, Williams theorises that subcultural resistance can be divided into three dimensions: passive and active, micro and macro, and overt and covert. He believes a full exploration of resistance dimensions is the essential component to theorise subcultural resistance.

While it is truly a refreshed approach to subcultural studies brought by Williams' development in theorising subcultural resistance, the model he provides has overlooked the relation between resistance and the individual biographies of subcultural members. In other words, an explanation of the fluidity in the varying resistance formats due to the life changes of individual subcultural members is lacking in the static division of resistance proposed by Williams, which may therefore neglect the essential value of the concept of resistance as a response to power exertion. More importantly, subculture analysts may adopt the three dimensions to simply categorise the resistance in a particular subculture, putting aside the underlying social dynamics. Therefore, it is argued that different levels of resistance in a subcultural scenario need to be explored with a profound reflection on the personal experience of subcultural members and their individual economic and social backgrounds. In a broader sense, individual histories as a component of a society history can reveal the dynamic relationship between state and society, which serves as the ultimate goal of subcultural studies.

The concept of individual biography was crucial in the subcultural theories from CCCS, where its evolvment out of the relationship between culture and social structure "remains a valuable one for the sociology of youth" (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2006: 125). Nevertheless, the focus of CCCS subcultural theories merely on inviting the concept of class, which played an important role in individual biography, can be seen as inadequate. The analysis of the role changes and relevant experiences in a person's life is necessary to understand subcultural practice and its value to subcultural members. In this case, an analysis of subcultural resistance can benefit from it to a great extent.

Method

The ethnographic approach was adopted to find out how punks articulate resistance and locate it in their individual biographies. As an effective way of understanding social practices and a community's beliefs (Thornton, 1997), ethnographic approaches combine different methods such as participant observations, interviews and diaries (O'Reilly, 2004). Interviews with thirty-six punk musicians and two punk fans conducted for this study took place in coffee shops, bars, live houses, and interviewees' homes; all are comfortable places which are suitable for informal conversations.

Participant observation was also conducted at this stage, with attention being given to visual styles and general activities. While in attendance at different live shows and informal punk gatherings, particular attention was paid to the conversations among punks regarding the themes in relation to punk performance and punk value. This method mainly requires researchers establishing themselves in "a place in some natural setting on a relatively long-term basis in order to investigate, experience and represent the social life and social processes that occur in that setting" (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2001:352).

As Hammersly and Atkinson (1995) suggested, an ethnographer may sample aspects including people, time, settings and contexts. Based on initial research, Beijing and Wuhan were selected as the main cities for the ethnographic research. To precisely explain punk resistance in China, an example of a key informant, Mr L who is from a prominent punk band in China, will be provided. By applying the approach of relating the individual's biography to resistance, it is anticipated that the social dynamics of punk resistance can be appreciated.

The Role of the Punk Network

The process of establishing a punk network can particularly be observed in Beijing and Wuhan. Except for punk gigs in live houses, informal punk gatherings or hangouts tends to occur in certain areas and places such as bars, restaurants or street corners. As the definition of subculture proposed by Williams suggests, the interactions among punks in those different spaces have led to a formation of shared meanings and practices in Chinese punk subculture. More importantly, the punk network allows the formation of a frame of reference for subcultural members to establish shared subcultural core values, which frequently assist the members in their life points. With regarding to subcultural resistance, the punk network enables members to resist individually and collectively.

Due to the imported feature of punk music, at least two frames of reference exist within punk subculture. The first one emerges from the process of localisation of punk music and its culture in China attributed to the interactions within a local punk network. The second one is more about how the punks in Anglo-American countries believe and behave, drawing upon an international punk network. These two frames of reference can overlap and inevitably impact each other, resulting in a relative static frame of reference in punk subculture.

Mr L is from a Skinhead Punk band, a key informant during the field study, has been chosen as an example for this paper due to his key role in forming punk norms and values. Mr L and his band have survived since 1999 and are well known by most of the other 'old school' punk bands. He attended most of the punk activities and held punk festivals. In the field, he was also seen to have numerous punk friends visiting him. One theme that arose from these punk gatherings was the insistence on having a punk visual appearance. He also has a strong network with German punks as a result of his band's music tour in Germany in 2007. Through frequent interaction with German punks, particularly involving comparing the situations in the two different countries including issues such as the government reactions to graffiti, Mr L has formed a strong criticism of China resulting in his argument that the establishment of a new society operating without government is necessary.

In this case, two frames of reference concern the insistence on visual style and political viewpoints. In order to construct a punk identity, most of the punk informants shared this idea with Mr L and insisted on visual appearance to resist conformity with Chinese mainstream society. In a broader sense, in a country with a socialist ideology, the strengthened anarchic mentality, which is shared by Mr L and most of punk informants, can only be explained as referring to the frame of European punk philosophy.

The Social Dynamics of Punk Resistance

In Williams' opinion, subcultural resistance can only be fully understood through categorizing its three dimensions. However, the changes of experiences and social position in a person's life are more relevant to understanding the concept of subcultural resistance. In the case of punk subculture, the intentions, formats and targets of punk resistance would possibly change following a change in a punk's total time of staying in the punk scene, his social positions, age and relations to outsiders. It is argued that the concept of subcultural resistance can be better understood through the analysis of this changing process of individual biography.

In this paper, Mr L's biography in terms of being a punk particularly is chosen and shows the social dynamics of punk resistance. In short, Mr L has experience from punk music shaping his social action in his early age to the formation of resistance discourse in the daily life when he gets older. Although the analysis is based on Mr L's punk life, it does not necessarily mean that other punks' lives are excluded. As the order of life tracks may differ individually, the life points that relate to the punk scene are more or less the same according to the ethnographic research. More importantly, the process from individual to collective is experienced by every single punk, which will be described below based on Mr L's experience. Therefore, the interpretations of his life should be appreciated as a representative and a means to provide a holistic vision of subcultural resistance.

Individual Resistance

DeNora (2003) emphasises that music has the ability to shape social action. For Williams, individual resistance termed as micro resistance is related to personal choices in their life. The social interactions concerning subculture is limited at this stage, thus subcultural resistance emerges normally in the process of starting a non-

conforming lifestyle by subcultural members.

In the case of Mr L, the construction of his punk identity began from attending a punk gig fifteen years ago. The music drove him to form a skinhead band, attain knowledge of punk music and adopt the punk style of visual appearance as a simple form of leisure. Simply to say, the punk consciousness was shaped by the sources he drew from the Internet and the live shows he attended.

At this stage, resistance ideologies emerged after he faced opposition from his parents—an authoritative figure in his life—and neighbours to his adopted punk look and behaviour, including violence and talk of political dissatisfaction. To put this into the bigger picture, anti-authority became the first theme that framed Mr L and his relationship to punk scene. In fact, a subcultural member is not necessarily susceptible to youth rebellion to parents without reasons. The social action, which in this case consists of Mr L's choosing to join in the punk scene and wear as a punk, invokes the conflicts between subcultural member and outsiders.

In China, this emerging conflict readily occurs since the society is rooted deeply in the social structure and authoritarian system. In the early 90s' Chinese society was influenced by Confucian philosophy, which it is argued continues to influence Chinese modern society and shapes it as a continuously conforming society (Weber, 2002). According to tradition, parents and government are both seen as a form of authority. The pressure of being non-conforming thus comes from the authorities along with the society members such as neighbours, peers, or even strangers walking in the street. This provides an explanation of the process of Mr L's individual resistance through visual style. Resistance by adopting a foreign style may be more appropriate than resistance by objects appropriation in the CCCS subcultural theories. According to Williams' analysis, this format of resistance stays in a micro level meanwhile being active. The result of ethnographic research showed that this format of resistance happened in most of the punks, especially when they first joined the punk scene or made decisions concerning punk lifestyle.

The critical attitude of retaining the status of non-conformity is strengthened by the reference of punk philosophy rooted in Anglo-American punks, which leads to Mr L's continuing resistance in dealing with the professional life. The stable 9-5 working schedule, accompanied with the emergence of another authority figure – a boss, was a concept which disgusted him since it was seen as a compromise to blend into the mainstream society. Thus withdrawing from the 9-5 schedule and spending more time in the punk scene became Mr L's choice. In this sense, a holistic approach may be adopted in his way of viewing Chinese society, thus the mainstream society as a whole becomes problematic. It is at this stage that resistance becomes a response to cope with the mainstream elements in Mr L's daily life.

Collective Resistance

In Williams' analysis, collective resistance is termed as meso-resistance or macro-resistance depending the size and influence of the activities. Collective resistance normally appears in a later stage of a subcultural member's life when he has submerged into a subculture and participated in different sorts of subcultural practices. It is at this stage that the subcultural identity is fully constructed through the constant

interactions among subcultural members. Regarding punk subculture, collective resistance easily arises from music festivals and group hanging-outs.

After establishing his band, Mr L became the founder of the longest held punk festival, also the only one that exists in China. After ten years' development, Mr L defines the punk festival as a space with free speech. In fact, the punk festival is not simply regarded as a cultural endeavour but is viewed as a space with equality and freedom, with activities such as moshing and pogoing resulting in breaking human boundaries, in contrast to an outside world full of hierarchy and constraints.

Mr L clearly has more resistance targets after holding the punk music festival. As a result of its political nature (i.e. due to the political nature of song lyrics), the punk music festival is scrutinised by the government. The actualisation of holding a festival can thus be regarded as collective resistance to government policies. By experiencing other different music festivals, Mr L and his companies decided to make the punk music festival more 'pure' and less commercial. It is in the process of discussing with other punks that the rule is made to this organisation. For Mr L, anti-authority and anti-commercialisation have increased to a collective level and become a reinforced empowerment. Punk unity, which is emphasised by the intention of holding a punk music festival, also gives motivation for Mr L to continue his punk lifestyle and reaction to other mainstream festivals and government deeds.

On a daily basis, punks choose bars or street corners for hanging-outs. In his case, Mr L's restaurant, which is structured as an underground live house with a shut door and a curtain covering for exclusion and loud punk music playing all the day along, serves as this daily space for punk gatherings. Through hanging out with other punk musicians or fans, the subcultural practices such as holding gigs and tours, creating albums and music videos are discussed and scheduled. More importantly, political views, punk cultures and the DIY philosophy are exchanged and shared, leading to a mutual reaction to all different formats of authorities. The constructed space with a flow of critical conversations is seen as a thoughtful and free space for punks in contrast to the outside environment, which is regarded as selfish and meaningless, for example. The frame of reference that emerges from the conversations also assists subcultural members with coping with their daily lives.

The Discourse of Resistance

Wilson and Stapleton found that "the dominated rejecting material and linguistic setting up of alternative discursive forms of resistance" happened in the nationalist community of Northern Ireland (2007: 419). Here the concept of discourse of resistance is adopted to conceptualise the contents and style of Mr L's speech. Resistance discourse signifies that Mr L has entered a new stage in his punk development.

The conversations held with Mr L, which were mostly led by him, can be seen as a discourse for analysis. Compared to other approaches, the discourse of resistance can be seen as a response to the current situation in China. It can be seen that the discursive process of resistance happens together with reflexive accounts on the right of free speech in China. While he believes that it is forbidden to discuss Tiananmen Square, Mr L speaks about it boldly and and comments on the mass fear of talking

about it. By setting up an entirely new pattern of discussing this event, Mr L, who represents himself as the dominated, resists the dominating frame of keeping silence and eliminating the memory of the politically sensitive issues. Interestingly, the mainstream forms an opposing power or pressure to Mr L, not just because those attitudes from most people but also from the impression or attitude that Mr L has of outsiders. Simply put, the frame of reference assists Mr L in coping with the problems brought by his identity and insistence. More importantly, he regards this bold behaviour as a way to differentiate himself from the ignorant mainstream.

Resistance discourse is formed through reflecting on the relationship between the subcultural scene and the mainstream. It can be seen as a daily resistant reaction. Compared to general complaint—a normal form of expressing dissatisfaction, resistance discourse is a systematic and characteristic means of communication, including the ways of exemplifying politically sensitive issues. From another perspective, the formation of a resistance discourse, which applied to the current stage of Mr L's life, increases his chances to demonstrate resistance from occasional times to every day.

Conclusion

By presenting one key informant Mr L's life histories in the light of being a punk member from the three-month ethnographic research, the above discussion has shown that individual biography is important in the interpretations of subcultural resistance. The life changes of a subcultural member will bring the changes of resistance formats. Essentially, the formats of individual resistance, collective resistance and resistance discourse happen at different stages of an individual's time as a subcultural member. Moreover, a discussion between individual resistance and social structure has also shown the potential of exploring the relationship between the state and society in this approach. It is anticipated that further analysis can be carried out based on the individual biographies of other subcultural members, in this case, punk members.

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