

Freshness of the subculture and urban youth music community in China

Danjing Zhang

Abstract

What kind of new culture is evolving among present-day youth in urban China? Through the lens of youth culture and digital media, this paper examines the proliferation of indie pop music culture in China; how it is formed and crystallized on the Internet and how it departs from the mainstream social values to manifest a new kind of social engagement by Chinese youth. Through an examination of *xiao qingxin*, an organic youth music community with their own initiatives, *xiao qingxin* has developed from the alternative cultural consumption of Indie-pop music to become a youth subculture in China. The paper presents an analysis of *xiao qingxin* phenomenon is linked to the rise of the social networking sites in China, such as Douban (www.douban.com). Since the development of a youth culture leans on the ever changing popular culture and Internet, the Internet plays a role of diffusion of cultural consumptions and changes the patterns of sociality where Chinese urban youth are able to quickly adopt global trend and universal values. The use of the social media not only channels the cultural consumptions but also facilitates urban alternative music communities and subculture. By following *xiao qingxin* tribes on Douban, it seems like many urban youth attempt to label themselves to negotiate and reconstruct their specific identity. It illustrates the changing aspiration and reaching social ramifications as the new face of the Chinese urban youth.

Key Words:

Urban subculture, youth identity, alternative music cultures, China

1. Introduction

In this paper I investigate how online and offline music communities have disseminated the meme of *xiao qingxin* to counter conspicuous consumption by China's urban youth. *Xiao qingxin* originates from the alternative cultural consumption of Indie-pop music. The term refers to a lifestyle rather than a musical genre; in some respects it has contradictions and for some is a sarcastic term to describe a narcissistic lifestyle centered on indie pop music, simple design, and sentimental statements.

I show how *xiao qingxin* has developed from music to become a youth subculture in China. According to Hebdige, subcultures usually create symbolic boundaries with distinctive style, ideology and practice.ⁱ While Indie pop music originated in the UK music in the 1980s, characterized by refreshing melody, *xiao qingxin* in China has its own connotation. The influence of Japanese and Taiwanese musical styles and aesthetics are prevalent in *xiao qingxin* culture. It is a hybrid for that entails themes of 'humanity': aesthetic preferences, as well as literary and artistic works, *xiao qingxin* (XOX) literally means 'little clean and fresh'. The term symbolizes a range of contending perspectives on Chinese youth's aspirations for simple and eco-friendly lifestyles.

The youth generation reflects rapidly changing life in contemporary China. According to the National Statistics Bureau of China's census figures in 2006ⁱⁱ, there were about 300 million people in China aged under 30, who are the drivers and chief beneficiaries of economic prosperity. However, the majority was born under the one child policy, a generation that is characterized by a fiercely competitive urban environment with waves of social issues of materialism and 'spirit vacuum'ⁱⁱⁱ. Chinese urban youth's mentalities and social networking patterns are contextualized in this profound social transaction. The economic market reform has produced a high degree of hedonism in Chinese society. Ci^{iv} believes that hedonism is an effect of nihilism, a loss of meaning. The issue now is what follows hedonism? Has materialism taken over the minds of the younger generation or are the ideological concepts still alive? With the rise of the economy, Chinese generations fell into diverse cliques chronologically; ranging from 'wenbao' (basically well off), 'xiaokang' (middle class), 'xiaozi' (urban bourgeois) to *xiao qingyin* (the urban hipsters) from 1970s to 1990s, which represents the shift to individualist expressing but collective identity of the youth. From 'wenbao' to *xiao qingyin*, it is exemplified the rise of a middle-class society in China, the emergence of a new and original Chinese bourgeois culture that centers itself on the outer and interior furnishings of a new Chinese self in the past decades. The self development has departed from traditional moral education to the individual turn in popular culture in which one seeks the good life based on materialism.

2. Alternative music consumption for Chinese me generation

XQX is a subculture identified as consumers of a certain kind of Indie Pop in China. Musical taste and style are the most important components of *xiao qingxin* identity. The Taiwanese indie pop singer Cheer Chen (Chen Qizhen) is regarded as a representation of *xiao qingxin*. Chen stirred up the waters of popular music in mainland China with her hit 'The Meaning of

Travel' in 1997. There are four reasons for her appeal in Mainland China. First, she gained her fame through her mellow beats and acoustic melodies. Her writing expresses lyrics about simple emotions; her playing guitar and singing pleasing to the ear melodies have become characteristics of XQX. According to Thomas Gold, Mainland Taiwanese pop music gained influence in the 1980s. The appeal of Taiwan and Hong Kong popular culture in Mainland is that lyrics' concentrate on small incidents and feeling that people can identify with; in contrast Mainland songs during this period featured themes of reform nationalism.^v

Furthermore, she retains independence on production and establishes a sample of youth icon expressing her opinions through lyrics and stand out from the mainstream commercial culture. There is a high degree of commercialization in Chinese music industry. She is positioned as a musician had independent production put out records on their own or with the help of independent record companies. Detaching from the mainstream commercial melody is the core value of her identity. Third, Chen is featured in low profile and low-budget fanzines; these help to create identities for independent talented composers, instrument player, music lover, and singers. In contrast with Hong Kong and Taiwanese pop idols (*ouxiang mingxin*) that are cultural commodities packaged, marketed commercially by the label companies. Fourth, her music is disseminated through the social media services (SNSs) in the mainland scene, spawning its own trademark labeled as *xiao qingxin*. Chen Qizhen has her own digital platform.

Chen's work and fan base is disseminated by Douban. Douban is a website where self-proclaimed intellectuals and urban hipsters gather to review books, movies, music, as well as organize events. Similar to Meetup website, Douban was established as a social networking portal in 1998 to facilitate offline group meetings in various cities in China. Douban allows members to find and join groups unified by a common interest, such as books, games, movies, volunteers, careers or hobbies. Members enter Douban Group or their city location, and the website helps them arrange a place and time to meet. The advent of the Internet and SNSs created the possibility that indie music could achieve mainstream success without the aid of a major record label and formal distributions. In 2012, there were 81691 fans on Chen's Douban Group. Parallel to Chen gaining popularity, a number of other artists appeared and self identified as *xiao qingxin*, including singers and bands: Joanna Wang, Zhang Xuan, Natural Q, Sodagreen, Lin Yifeng, Coffee and Milk. They are differentiated themselves from the 'commercial' quality in the mainstream Hong Kong and Taiwan pop culture.

Recognizing consumption culture's central role in urban youth's life, Maffesoli's 'tribe'^{vi} is useful to apply to youth subcultures. Maffesoli's tribe 'refers to a certain ambience, a state of mind, and is preferable to be expressed through lifestyles that favour appearance and form.'^{vii} Underpinning Maffesoli's concept of tribes, Bennett suggests that consumption and style play a role in overall ethical consciousness: he notes that the 'concept of tribes is a concern to illustrate the shifting nature of collective associations between individuals as societies become increasingly consumer oriented.'^{viii} Bennett argues that the musical and stylistic sensibilities of people are indicative of a late modern sociality. 'The musical tastes and stylistic preferences of youth, rather than being tied to issues of social class, as subculture maintains, are in fact examples of the late modern lifestyles in which notions of identity are' constructed' rather than 'given'.^{ix} Regarding to style and music as key factors in defining XQX, XQX has distinctive preference for artistic concepts. They focus on pure and natural subjects in terms of 'the natural beauty'. The members of XQX subculture also identified with Japanese director Shunji Iwai and renowned Chinese novelist Eileen Zhang.

As style is another key to identify a particular subculture, there are modularized visual tropes that youth can use to make a visual statement about their individuality. XQX introduced simple and natural fashion style, including items like navy striped T-shirts, white cotton skirts, canvas shoes and LOMO cameras. These are not status oriented label outfits, XQX fashion is about being practical and comfortable but still stylish, the anarchist 'against the luxury label'. Their unique dress code is sending a message about their attitudes to differentiate them from the mainstream youth image symbolized by youth carrying the newest and high status brand name. Therefore, XQX has manifested them in a symbolic value.

While XQX's main audiences are Chinese one child generation, their identity has expressed through picking new music genre label and related symbolic concepts and values. Emphasizing on 'self-expression', XQX is a music genre catering to single-child generation's need to build a progressive identity on the metaphor of 'green and clean'. The 'one child generation' (*dusheng zinu*) is defined by those born after 1979 under China's 'one-child policy'. Liu argues the *balinghou* (the post-80s) and *jiulinghou* (the post-90s) generations are characterized as the privileged generation. The one child policy generation is often criticized as the 'little emperors and empresses'^x, famous for 'having no ideals or values, not hard-working, being weak-willed, lacking a sense of responsibility, being selfish, brand conscious and fashion-savvy'. He also argues they are not so much interested in the instigation of political or social change. The traditional culture expects the youth play a role of purple learning from the seniors. Therefore, they learn to keep their true thoughts to themselves, only revealing their more conformist opinions.

In contrast, the continuity of the emerging tribe of urban hipster reflects shifted values and shared consciousness through alternative music choice. XQX has formed a specific generational cohort in the sense that later generations of youth have continued to discover and maintain the popularity of such acts to a much greater extent. The changing materialistic environment forces many Chinese youth to re-think their social perception.

Combining the previous generation's thriftiness with the new ostentation, the post-80s and post-90s generations have displayed a sense of identity seeking 'the good life' based on materialism. In contrast, *xiao qingyin* with a high educational level, demonstrated the emerging groups of urban hipster who have an individualistic quest for meaning and freer thinker. In contrast to the negative images of this generation as hedonistic and materialistic, increasing awareness of the values of nature, choice and diversity have emerged as positive moral changes in identity of the youth generation. Therefore, *xiao qingyin*'s self-definition is connected with the self realization. They have re-thinking their social perceptions. The popularity of the *xiao qingyin* indie pop music genre reflects this generation's changing value and aspiration shifted from happiness seeking via conspicuous consumption to happiness seeking via cultural consumption and alternative lifestyle.

There are other cultural factors behind this evolution of youth culture. XQX provides a utopian imaginary from the chaos in the rapid competition and social pressure in the rapid urbanized society. The subculture of XQX functions as a space for escape and facilitates a sense of belonging for China youth. It lifts urban youth out of the generally volatile and impetuous reality in society, described as 'fu zao', a popular term. Another main reason of the development of XQX from a cyber culture to a subculture is the Chinese online society is a wild, lawless carnival dominated by the youth. Herold^{xi} points out that Chinese Internet user are relatively young and there is a great deal of 'wild' online behavior, which is much less regulated than offline.

The consumption of XQX music illustrates urban youth's departure from an image of only interested in instant gratification and hedonism. Urban youth make choice of music consumptions that reflects their identities and aspiration of lifestyle. They are no longer satisfied with being fed of pop cultural with full commercial characteristic. This can be regarded as a resistance from the materialism in the mainstream culture. Indie music communities exemplify its construction of youth symbolic identity to counter materialism. Concerned about the inner world related symbolic concepts and values, it is manifest in the choice of the language of lyrics, value judgments, as well as aesthetic influences through the lens of XQX community building and new lifestyle adoption.

Focused on self indulgence rather than critical, XQX is distancing rather than confronting the mainstream popular culture, therefore it is feminine and narcissism compared with other music genre like Beijing Rock. XQX subculture could become mainstream and more commercial relevance as they could be new source for marketing. Wang^{xii} separated the musical subcultures and musical tribal cultures in Chinese context. She says music in China is seen primarily as an entertainment culture; pop music is essentially tribal and commercial in nature. She put 'lifestyle is a matter of choice and musical taste is not reliable as a sustained market of personal and social identities for metropolitan youths in China.'^{xiii} It is blurring to distinguish 'indie' from 'mainstream' in Chinese context: it is not a counter culture such. Because XQX is a lifestyle subculture in essence it could be used for advertising purpose, therefore, losing its original symbolic values.

3. Case study: the spread of *xiao qingxin* phenomenon

The development of digital media is crucial in constructing and promoting the XQX phenomenon. As organized around a distinctive SNS channel Douban, XQX is the term first appeared on Cheer Chen's virtual fan club on website Douban in 2009. Douban links the segments of urban youth population and organizing the alternative musical events. 92.5% of Douban users are in the 18-35 age group and 70% live in the major urban cities. According to Bakhshi and Schneider^{xiv}, they are highly educated with relative high income. Douban utilizes youth fandom and hobbyists' communities online and offline and links urban youth's desire for formation of the subculture. While Douban vehicle the participatory of music fandom communities online and offline, it has created new forms of cultural consumption, experiences and a sense of group cohesiveness for the urban youth in China. As a consequence, the urban youth's encounter with the global values is contingent with the consumptions of books, music and movies. The value of new lifestyles and new life aspirations under the influence of globalization reaches these urban youth through new communication technologies and market promotion of consumerism.

Internet platforms such as Douban constitute new types of sociality through engaging youth with similar hobbies to form communities, thereby participating effectively in drawing young people into urban activities. As a generation without siblings and lack of companionship, the single generation is seeking the sociality in urban environments. Urban youth have utilized the Internet to grow their individual social networks with sufficient interest in music and fandom, to form webs of interpersonal relationships in cyberspace. With the development of communication technologies, urban youth's new patterns of sociality have emerged. Shang et al.^{xv} argues that the community based 'small worlds' has appealed to the urban youth. 'Small world networks'^{xvi} are defined as 'collective activities by shared identity; sometimes they are constituted by friends or family or by people who share common interests or pursuits'.^{xvii} In this case, the ritual of the XQX subculture is about sharing the music interest and organizing groups to participant in off line musical events. For example, as outlined by the website Douban, there are 270,000 registered online youth communities within the website in 2012, mainly characterized by members' sharing a passion for a particular activity or cultural product. These communities continue to include offline activities such as exchanging CDs and going to concert on weekend. The online community is therefore a resource from which people can foster friendships on the ground. Douban illustrated the formation of music community and promotion of subculture in China; these are largely the result of individuals choosing to socialize with others who share similar consumer values. Therefore, Internet has become new types of identity constitution refine new youth culture and societal recognition.

4. Conclusion: spread like wildfire, alternative turns collective

Since the opportunities of the digital social networking offering means to facilitate the spread of the subculture. XQX was introduced and exchanged through youth online social networks. The new technology allows subculture on the margin have a chance to flourish in this case alternative music genres which attract specific segments of the audiences and organize events more easily. This glues the fragmentation of the young generation identity and attribute to their creative activities. It further enables a subculture being competitive with respect to the mainstream popular culture and build up their symbolic identity based on exclusiveness. What attracts youth to the XQX subcultures is the opportunity to be part of a collective where they can form a collective youth identity, while at the same time being recognized as individuals. Popular culture in China depicts the process of individualization has also given relevance to new kinds of collectives. Will XQX remain as a unique youth subculture adamant or shift from one style to the next? Will XQX weight significant for the countercultural movements in China? Although XQX is indicated as the minority in the youth culture, more and more middle class youth are labeling them XQX. The XQX music culture is thus faced with a dilemma that their subcultures is going mainstream. The continuity and sustainability of the XQX subcultures require further discussion.

Endnotes

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- xiv Hasan Bakhshi and Philippe Schneider, 'Crossing the River by Feeling for Stones: A New Approach to Exporting Creative Content to China?' (2012) <http://www.nesta.org.uk/library/documents/CrossingTheRiver.pdf.2012>, Accessed at 9th November 2012.
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Danjing Zhang is a doctoral student in the Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia. She had her masters by research on Creative Industries in China. Recently, her research interest focuses on urban youth's ethical awareness and media sociology in China.