

Club as Multiple Symbolisms of Temporary Society -----the case study of “HYS” club ¹ in Beijing

Yuxin Hou²

Abstract

This essay is based on the fieldwork conducted by the author from the HYS club in Beijing and it includes several aspects such as the introduction; music, people, space and time in HYS club; multiple relationships and interaction; and conclusion. From the discussion, the author aims to portray the club as the multiple symbolism of a temporary society in which the people, time, space and music interact with each other while the club is also playing a complementary role to a stable hierarchical society. Clubs serve as a platform for the gathering of people with different backgrounds while providing music, space and time to those who wish to experience the sensation that is different from what they could receive from their daily base. The club goes in the process of connecting, discontinuity, and re-creation in the club are going through the flowing experience and interactions among different actors wherein the club as multiple symbolism of temporary society is playing the role of society recreation and reintegration.

Keywords: HYS club, music, space, time, people, multiple symbolisms, temporary society

Introduction

The club of HYS is located in Beijing and it is one of most prosperous locations with cultural diversity in Beijing. From Monday to Sunday, HYS had distinct music themes and charges. Sundays, Mondays, and Tuesdays are the “less expensive” nights that provides men with one free drink for 20 Yuan (Chinese currency) entrance fee and one free drink for women without charge. On Wednesday, it is called “Enjoyable drinking night,” the entry fee is 150 Yuan for men and 30 Yuan for women. From 8 pm to 3:30 am the next day, everyone could drink as much as they can from the designated wine list. On Thursday, it is the “lady’s night” when women get two free drinks while men pay 60 Yuan as an entrance fee before 10 pm and 100 Yuan after 10 pm. On Friday, it is “Tequila night” and the same rules for Thursday nights apply. On Saturday, before 10:30 pm, HYS charges 100 Yuan entrance fee for men with two cups of free drinks and free entry for woman.

The customers of HYS club are mainly University students and teenagers, while foreign students account for about thirty percent of the whole population. This club has three isolated rooms, a dancing floor, which is in the basement; a drinking bar, which is on the first floor and an entertainment room, which is on the second floor. The style of decorations is fused popular, rock air, and Chinese “red culture.” The basement has a medium sized dancing floor that is divided into three parts. In the middle of the room, there is a square dancing floor, which is circulated by the antique steel and two neck stages for free dancing and is close to the music console. Interestingly, in other clubs, the neck stage is the space for professional lead dancers, dancing in the middle thereby creating an atmosphere of excitement and fascination. However, HYS club rejects this kind of arrangement. They would rather place the dancers in the center of neck stages. And, in the west is the music console. Some sofas and high chairs encircle the rest of the west section.

¹ At the request of the boss of the club, the real name of the club has been anonymous with “HYS”

² Yuxin Hou is a visiting research scholar at the Graduate Center of City University of New York and also an assistant research fellow at Institute for Philanthropy Tsinghua University. He received his PhD in Anthropology from Peking University in 2012. This research is funded by the Fort Foundation.

Email: yuxinhou82@gmail.com

The folk music has been totally replaced by pop and rock music in HYS club. One of the staffs told the author he abhorred folk music because it is the synonym of obsolete. Bennett wrote: “Indeed, it is my view that the cultural role of rap and hip hop cannot be assessed without reference to the local settings in which they are appropriated and reworked as modes of collective expression.” (Andy Bennett, 1999:78) To some extent, the author conceives the music not only as the outlets of releasing collective feelings, but it is a form of multiple metaphors of culture and local choices.

No man or experts could thoroughly express and understand other expressions and behaviors, and the process of approaching the choice of music is an asymptotic process. Yet, the sensory disappearance of folk music has been supplanted by the appearance of the red culture decoration in the HYS. “In modern society with weak traditional bonds and with the gradual disappearance of the institution of public mockery and judgment, the role of the motive power of the public opinion takes over semi-governmental institutions, especially in socialism” (Rajko Mursic, 1995:56). Although the club is not a semi-governmental institution, it plays the role by expressing a public opinion in a special way. As for HYS club, the strong traditional bond of music seemingly was replaced by the modern bonds of popular music. However, traditional bonds never vanish, rather, they exist in the implicit way of “red culture” decoration. This kind of implicit display is also a way of showing the complicated feeling about folk music, which has been recalled through nostalgic decoration.

The music in HYS features popular and rock without Chinese music, not to mention the folk music. When the author asked the DJ from American and South Korea respectively about the distinction between the popular and folk music, the former said he cannot clearly know the circumscription between popular music and folk music and he only chose and played the music that he would like to play. The latter replied that he conceived that popular music is more tolerant and innovative than folk music. For the relationship between folk and popular music, Rajko Mursic holds that:

There is no simple answer to the question of the relationship between folk and popular music. If we discuss folk and popular music from the point of view of the active participants in the musical activities, and especially if we analyze the use of music in the particular life contexts of individuals and groups of people, it becomes clear that almost all the characteristics of the old folk music appear in modern popular music, although in changed circumstances. Popular music is not universal and it cannot be a means of homogenization, for it is more democratic than totalitarian (Rajko Mursic, 1996:59).

The sense interruption never means the end of feeling. This club included plural music meaning and it also converged a prolific symbolism of temporary society, not only including the internal structure but also the external composition. Internally, it involved the interaction among Chinese students, foreign students, local citizens, countrymen, migrants, employed people, unemployed people, pub staffs, and the boss, etc. Externally, there were interesting relationships between the HYS and other clubs; the street vendors around HYS club, etc. From this complicated relationships, not only did the author sense the radiation of multiple temporary societies, but also the charms and witchcraft of music.

Music, people, space, and time in HYS club

If we understand music as a non-verbal sound game, it has a double nature. Its sonic form is based on a timeless spatial-like structure, while it is a social phenomenon as well, sunken in time. With this humanly organized sound, people can express what they cannot express with words. It is a symbolic practice and communication, but we cannot decipher what it actually says. Its meaning is not encoded in the musical material but derived from the structured response among the listeners. The author discusses music with the Lacanian concepts of the Symbolic and the Real. Music is either propositional without being able to define its propositions, or it is performative without being able to define the acts it actually defines. Music defines the limits of language. It opens up the door of the Real, but at the same time controls the incoming mess. In popular music, we can see that neither the authors and producers nor the audience are able to understand its texts entirely. (Rajko Mursic, 2005:145)

Music is a special form of expressing complicated feelings and far from thoroughly understanding. The listeners are the best evaluators and interpreters who also constantly change their feelings and understandings toward the music with the transformation of mood, place, and time. To some extent, the author conceives music, people, time, and space as a whole. However, its internal structure is never monolithic but mutable. The preoccupied theory holds that humans are the highest creatures that have possessed the culture, wisdom, and civilization, while other things or objects have no life. To some extent, this is the embodiment of anthropocentrism. Arjun Appadurai has come up with "Economic exchange creates value. Value is embodied in commodities that are exchanged. Focusing on the things that are exchanged, rather than the forms of functions of exchange make it possible to argue that what creates the link between exchange and values is politics, constructed broadly. This argument, which is elaborated in the text of this essay, justifies the conceit that commodities, like persons, have a social life." (Arjun Appadurai, 1986:3) In one sense, music also belongs to commodities and has its own mobile circle. So the author contemplates that music, from this source, also possesses social life. From producers to clubs and to listeners, the process of circulation involves numerous factors, coincidence, possibilities, and variations. People, time, and space and music flow into a "non-verbal sound game" and changing world. Even the same music experiences different fates in different clubs. "People" are only a sweeping concept and should be subdivided into some concrete notions.

Beijing is one of the biggest immigration cities in China. Every year, there are more and more people who migrate from every corner of China. Meanwhile, it is the center of culture, economy, and politics in China. Most famous clubs, musicians, bands, and DJs dwell here and provide multiple music styles for customers. HYS club is one of them. Every night, around HYS club, there are some stands that sell discount commodities and food, which mainly provides for the customers of HYS club. Next to HYS club, there is a 24-hours supermarket and some customers of HYS club who cannot afford the high cost of things in the club will go shopping in this shop.

Based on the discussion, the people at HYS can be classified into several types including foreign students, Chinese students, Beijing citizens, migrants, country people, staffs, boss, unemployed people and others, among whom, the complicated relationship and interaction gets into the scene. They constitute the relationship network, which revolves around the club and music. The author names it as the "temporary society." During the fieldwork, the author had witnessed various types of events and confrontation among them and the music had become the medium of interpretation of connections.

Music in HYS club has experienced the change from folk music to popular music. The HYS club was established by a folk music producer who focused on the extensive use of folk music. From the recalling of the past staffs and friends of the HYS club, there remained a strong attachment to the special time when they sought the pure music without the disturbance from commercial operation. The early folk music elements borrowed a huge scope from different corner of China including minority folk music as well as Chinese traditional classical music. At that time, every week, the HYS club held different folk music parties by inviting different kinds of folk artists and folk music lovers. The relationship between listeners and the music was the traditional mode of listening and performance. The former HYS club concentrated on folk music, which had become the medium of interaction among people having a different background but with the same music philosophy. The former boss was also a devout Buddhist and upheld that the music should be far away from commercial purpose. However, with the impact of western music and diversity of music consumption as well as economic issues, the former HYS clubs boss transferred the club to the current boss who focused on popular and rock music.

A boss of another club told the author that his music business philosophy is "you stand head and shoulders above others" in the current trend of popular music competition. "The power of popular music is its utility, its ability to transcend social boundaries, political borders, and generation gaps. Any kind of music is deeply ambivalent, manifold, and essentially dynamic. Within music, an essential aspect of 'being in the world' are being met. Music is always both social and individual." (Rajko Mursic, 1998:281-282) In reality, compared folk music to popular music, popular music states the situation as more inclusive, transcended, and multiple. During the process of development of music, it seems to follow the evolutionary theory, which presupposed with certainty that the latter is better than former. However, the evolution of music was doomed to be defeated by relativity and dialectics. The final arbitrators and evaluators are the listeners who will explicitly or implicitly express their taste. The boundary between reality and symbolism could never be clearly fixed. The uncertainty is still located in the tracks among the flow of time and space.

For a long time, Anthropology of music concentrated on the village research and neglected the city and the focus is mainly on folk music and tribe music. Even some of them refer to urban research; they all pay much attention to urban reserves and how to protect the original rural traditional and ancient palace music. So, we had a misunderstanding that the Anthropology of music mainly focus on the research of primitive tribe music and remote area music with Anthropology method and distinguish it from the urban research which belongs to the field of sociology. Facing up with the development of urbanization and urban music culture and the multiple trends of urban music culture, especially till the 1960s, western anthropologists who conduct the research about Anthropology of music ponder the scope of research should transcend the narrow remote areas and tribes to the broader scene of human music activities. Naturally, urban music should also belong to the research objects of anthropology interests (Shi Yong, 2006:135)

In China, most of the scholars who conduct urban music research are not anthropologists and the space and time in the club also tended to be overlooked. So, the discussion regarding the symbolism of space and time in the club is insufficient. The current boss of HYS club told the author that time and space had the intimate relationship with music and he had some comprehensive strategies to design the space and time of the club so as to cater for the diverse taste. From the description of the decoration above, the mixed nature of decoration and some seemingly contradictory caches aiming to establish a polyhedral complex thought could be discerned. The disappearance of folk music in HYS club is the dislocation of sense but it still exists in another form which is embodied in the changing feelings stemming from the combination of the red culture decoration, popular music, dancing, imagination, decomposition and regeneration of symbolic feelings.

Multiple relationship and interaction

The former boss of HYS established this club for the purpose of holding some folk music parties. However, with the increase of the rent in Beijing, he could not afford it. At that time, most of the customers came from the independent music producers, folk music lovers, and initial bands. This boss was paranoid toward folk music but he did not have the business sense and brains. From the informant who was the good friend of the former boss and visited here occasionally, he told the author that he appreciated the boss a lot, thanks to his motto "Folk music is an elegant art and has nothing to do with commercial speculation and money worship." However, he felt so concerned that the folk music was facing up with the impact of the increasingly competitive music market. After transferring the HYS to the current boss, the popular and rock music had been introduced into the club and two DJ from American and South Korean also had been hired. In addition, the staffs had been chosen through the rigid three rounds interview. The boss had his own standards for selecting staffs. Firstly, all the waiters should come from the Universities; the security guards must be tall and strong. Secondly, the staffs should be music lovers including the cleaners. Thirdly, they could speak simple English. The reasons for such standards can be summarized as follows. First of all, University students have the relatively high quality which tends to give good impressions to customers. And then, music lovers tend to enjoy their own work environment at night. In addition, safety is first and the stronger security guards could provide customers with the sense of security. Lastly, knowing English is the tool for communication with the foreign customers. Furthermore, among them, the special relationship remains. For example, the boss was in the position of formulating the unilateral contracts and rules. Before and after work, the assistant manager must hold short meetings based on the order from the boss and should report the outcome to him. From time to time, the boss inspected the work situation and the staff will be fired once they broke the rules.

During the fieldwork, the author met such kinds of situation. Two dismissed staffs told the author they did not blame their boss because they had breached the agreement and regulation. One of them reckoned that the HYS club was a temporary society with its own hidden rules. Only they knew how to make good use of it, they could enjoy the maximum benefits and even encounter the helpful person who could provide them with better jobs. To some extent, this temporary society in HYS club is mainly comprised of the boss, assistant manager, staffs and customers, etc. However, even for other equal human groups, they also have some subtle status differences. Among them, DJs, accountants, and the security captain had a different relationship with the boss who offered them additional salaries. This special relationship put waiters and cleaners at the high risk of being dismissed by the boss.

The customers in HYS club comprises of the dance lovers, Club English learners, and the people who wanted to release their unpleasant emotions or relax, alcoholics, etc. HYS club also had another name “FSC” which is the simple abbreviation of “Foreign Students Club.” This name made it different from other clubs. The boss also made good use of it to attract some Chinese people who are fond of this international atmosphere. Most of the “Club English learners” were the University students who mainly wanted to practice their oral English with foreigners in HYS club. Some of them had established a long-term friendship, however, most of them are only the nodding friends. During the process of communication, they chatted, drank, danced together in HYS. As usual, Chinese students liked to go to HYS club in organized groups through the college forums like BBS.

For those people who disliked the noisy music, they chose to chat and enjoy more soothing music on the second floor where the decoration is more westernized. The music style mainly featured some soft music, which could be chosen by customers. In the middle of the room, there was a billiard table that was always busy. It was also the medium for making friends through the competition. Some Chinese and the South Korean students who wanted to practice their oral English also chose here. Certainly, learning languages from each other was an important way of increasing the relationship between the Chinese and foreigners. In line with observation, the relationship established on the second floor was more sustainable than in the dancing place. A college student told the author that the dancing place was an unstable and illusory environment created by the “noisy music” and he believed the folk music could make him better. Another foreign student who studied Chinese told the author he wanted to enjoy more Chinese folk music but could not find it in HYS. For them, the nostalgia feelings that is related to folk music has been brought into the light.

The HYS had a subtle relationship with the surrounding clubs, neighboring 24-hours market, street vendors, etc. The 24-hours market became the favored place for those people who wanted to save money for drinking. In the summer, after dancing, the people went out to drink and enjoyed the fresh air. So the cheaper price of the close market has attracted lots of HYS customers. One waiter told the author that the market belongs to the boss of HYS club. The last human group the author wants to discuss is the migrants. In Beijing, every year, there were more and more migrants. Some young migrants are the club goers and they always came in groups. They tended to dance till the end and waited for the time of “dancing battle” which is when most of the customers stopped dancing and appreciated their show time. The author made friends with some of them and they said in the daytime they were the hard workers at the foot of the social ladder and they needed a space to vent their repressed emotions. Andy Bennett also discussed the minorities in Germany who tried to express their antagonism through the hip hop music.

In this article, I want to examine the cultural significance of rap music and the hip-hop culture for the youth of certain ethnic minority groups in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. I will consider how groups of youth associated with immigrant populations originating mainly from Turkey and parts of Northern Africa, in particular, Morocco, have appropriated aspects of African-American hip-hop culture and moving beyond a point of straightforward imitation, are now beginning to rework it to act as a mode of expression for a range of local issues. In particular, hip hop is being used as a medium for the expression of issues relating to racism and the problem of national identity often experienced by the younger members of ethnic minority groups in Germany. (Andy Bennett, 1999:78)

In China, popular music and dancing have become the crucial means of venting the complicated feelings of those migrants in a big city like Beijing. When they entered the club, the structure of the temporary society of the club offered them with the space of showing their emotions that can never be released in their daily life. Through the music and the body language, migrants uttered their wishes of entering into the mainstream society and for being concerned via the different ways. Music is the center of relation system and is involved in the process of transformation and change from the coexistence of space, time, and multiple interactions in HYS club. The social life of music mixed the change from the folk music to popular music in HYS club in the context of the variation of space, time, and human groups. The temporary society in HYS club is beyond monolithic situation but follows with the internal unrest and dynamic balance. The elements gathering in the process of music experience recreate the rebirth of the updating temporary society in which the multiple symbolism of flow was weaved by space, time, people and interaction.

Conclusion

Above all, the author has discussed the HYS club as a temporary society based on the interaction of music, space, time, and people. The driving forces of the interaction and variable connections were from the flowing experience of individuals in the process of connecting, discontinuity, and re-creation. Music is a kind of medium that releases a magical power and changing flow that causes the club goers to go through the process which could never be clearly sensed but continue at will. Space and time were closely connected to music and operated through the sense and choice of goers who draw support from dancing language and body impulse which prompted them into the different situation. The club as a temporary society has implicated the multiple symbolisms as the way of society recreation and reintegration and also provides the avenue for the club goers to experience a different sensation from their daily experience.

The multiple symbolisms of the temporary society of HYS club could be illustrated as follows. On one hand, the club as a temporary society serves a complementary role to a stable hierarchical society. The goers were able to find their own happiness in the club which they hardly received from the demarcated society. In clubs, the clear boundaries of hierarchical society had been broken under the role of music, dancing, and interaction in the imaginable world. On the other hand, the club as a temporary society is the new connection of space, time, people and music. Although human, space, time, and music are the indispensable part of society, the meaning of these four elements has been endowed with the dynamic implication that differs from the general social rules and institutional constraints. To some extent, the club is also a flowing society in which you could establish and discompose the relationship at any time. Lastly, the club provides the goers the occasion where the process of music was experienced. Victor Turner stressed that society seems to be a process rather than a thing--- dialectical process with successive phases of structure and “communitas.” There would seem to be--- if one can use such a controversial term---a human “need” to participate in both modalities. (Victor Turner, 1995) The author conceives the concept “communitas” as very insightful for understanding the club as a temporary society in which the music and flowing process are intertwined. There are more things waiting to be discussed regarding this topic.

Reference Cited

- Andy Bennett. (1999). Hip hop am Main: The Localization of Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture. *Media, Culture & Society*, 21(1):77-91
- Arjun Appadurai. (1986). *The Social Life of Things”: Commodities in Cultural Perspectives*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rajko Mursic. (1995). Punks in the Village the Rock Group CZA (center for dehumanization) between Villages on the Border Slovenia Dominant Culture, ACTA UNIVERSITATIS LODZIENSIS, POLIA ETHNOLOGICA 8
- Rajko Mursic. (1996). A “Black Box” of Music Use: on Folk and Popular Music”, *Nar. Umjet.* 33/1:59-74.
- Rajko Mursic. (1998). Autochthonisation of Rock Music in Rural Slovenia. In: Toru Mitsui(ed.), *Popular Music: Intercultural Interpretations*. Kanazawa: Graduate Program in Music, Kanazawa University (281-288)
- Rajko Mursic. (2005). Ethnographic Experience, Understanding and Narratives in the Discourse of Popular Music, In: *Text and Reality*. Ljubljana: Institute of Slovenia Ethnology at ZRC SAZU ZRC Publishing
- Shi Yong. (2006). Review On Tang Yating's New Work Urban Music Sight. *Huangzhong (Journal of Wuhan Music Conservatory)* . (04): 135-137
- Victor Turner. (1995). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. Aldine Transaction