

A Modern Interpretation of the Dionysian Spirit in Contemporary Chinese Rave Culture

Yeuk Di Du

Beijing National Day School, Beijing, China
yeukdidu@hotmail.com

Abstract. Using the Dionysian as its theoretical framework, this article examines contemporary Chinese underground rave culture. Existing research has largely focused on Western scenes to explain the relationship between raving and ecstatic experience, leaving the Chinese context comparatively underexplored. This study considers how the Dionysian spirit changes as rave culture becomes localized within the social and cultural environment of contemporary China. It argues that regulation and commercialization have jointly shaped a local form of Dionysian practice. Changes in the urban environment also influence where this culture appears and how it survives. The article first analyzes how electronic rhythm and immersive visual effects loosen individual boundaries through bodily perception. It then explores how rave activities temporarily reshape the functions of everyday spaces and interrupt the established order of urban time. Finally, the article considers the social position of rave culture and explains how its pursuit of freedom develops through continued adaptation to public perceptions and existing social structures. Rave culture in the Chinese context emerges from the interaction between external constraints and internal adjustment. It retains the desire for ecstatic experience and collective emotional release. Embedded within the existing social order as a moderated practice, it continues to change in response to the conditions that sustain it.

Keywords: Rave, Raving Culture, Dionysian Spirit, Subculture, Youth Culture

1. Introduction

First articulated in Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, the Dionysian describes a mode of experience defined by ecstasy, the dissolution of individuality, and the breakdown of rational boundaries [1]. Unlike the Apollonian which emphasizes order, clarity and individualization, the Dionysian promotes intoxication, chaos and collective disintegration [1]. Nietzsche put this force in the ancient Greek tragedy, but this analytical framework is not limited to that time and place - in the modern cultural form that promotes intensity and physical experience, this group of antagonism also emerges repeatedly.

China's underground rave culture offers a contemporary setting in which to reconsider the Dionysian spirit. Distinctive rave scenes have emerged in Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, and other cities. These scenes often operate beyond formal cultural institutions and develop through continued

negotiation with regulatory oversight. Within their temporary spaces, intense sensory experience weakens individual identity and suspends the ordinary perception of time [2].

This article argues that Chinese underground rave culture presents a localized form of the Dionysian and reshapes Nietzsche's original concept through contemporary cultural practice. Rave culture in China has developed under the influence of public policy, commercial forces, and existing social structures. These conditions have gradually produced a moderated form of Dionysian practice that continues to change within the contemporary Chinese context.

2. Literature review

Existing scholarship has largely examined rave culture through the concept of the Dionysian. C. A. Friesen, for example, interprets the bodily intensity of raving through Nietzsche's distinction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, contrasting the discipline of the individual with moments in which intoxication dissolves those boundaries into collective experience [3]. Most of this work remains grounded in Western contexts and pays relatively little attention to the development of underground rave culture in China. This paper therefore turns to the contemporary Chinese scene, asking how the Dionysian is expressed under a different set of social, cultural, and regulatory conditions..

As a foreign subculture, China's underground rave relies on the urbanization process, digital media platform and social control system to form its own development environment [2]. The development of this culture in China presents a cyclical trajectory of introduction, control restrictions and reshaping new life. Its rise and fall are highly related to the overall transformation of urban culture and social governance. In the 1990s, rave culture was introduced to Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and other cities. At that time, the culture was regarded as a cultural symbol of urban internationalization and social opening up in the post-planned economy period, but the overall size of the audience was limited. At the beginning of the 21st century, the relevant regulatory policies continued to be tightened in response to the governance requirements of drug-related chaos. Nightclubs in various places were centrally rectified, and the local rave circle shrank accordingly. From 2009 to the entire 2010s, relying on the popularization of digital platforms and the emergence of a new generation of participating groups, the rave culture ushered in a revival. Electronic music, especially electronic dance music (EDM), has gradually entered the public's vision, and the commercial entertainment industry has expanded rapidly. At the same time, the independent underground scene continues to exist. After the COVID-19 pandemic, the venues and organizational forms of domestic rave activities are more diverse and flexible. The activity space is no longer limited to fixed commercial nightclubs, and various temporary venues and composite activity modes have appeared in large numbers. This change is the external embodiment of cultural creative expression, long-term mutual adjustment of digital technology and control system, and the game. Even if it is always bound by laws, regulations and various practical conditions, rave activities still provide participants with a unique spiritual buffer space, so that they can temporarily escape from daily pressure and secular social discipline for a limited period of time.

3. Findings and discussion

In order to analyze how the local Chinese rave culture reinterprets the spirit of Dionysian in the context of contemporary society, the following will be discussed from three levels: its unique aesthetic characteristics, the heterogeneous space-time experience built, and the gentle rebellious characteristics formed in the dual environment of supervision and commercialization.

3.1. Ecstasy and carnival

Since the 2010s, and especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, the local Chinese rave culture still retains the three core aesthetic characteristics of immersion, circular rhythm and extreme ecstasy. At the same time, the culture presents distinctive local integration characteristics, combining the universal rave activity form with the local cultural symbols [2]. Relying on this aesthetic system, electronic beats and intensive sensory stimulation create a state of intoxication similar to the classical Dionysian sacrificial ceremony [1], while modern digital technology further reshapes human perception and fosters participants' sense of collective immersion.

From a musical perspective, at present, all kinds of domestic rave scenes take electronic dance music as the core, covering house, new beat, breakbeat, acid house, techno, hardcore techno and other subdivisions. This kind of music is based on the drum beats of a stable cycle, and the creative focus is on rhythmic arrangement rather than melody. Most of them contain no lyrics, and emotional transmission does not rely on narrative text. It relies on beats to directly affect the human body [3]. At the rave scene, the DJ ensures that the music is coherent and uninterrupted through mixing operations, and the continuous high-decibel sound waves wrap the participants in a strong sensory atmosphere for a long time [3].

Bodily expression at the rave scene follows the same set of logic: there are no standardized dance steps and choreography paradigm, and dance skills and visual appreciation are not the core demands. Participants swing freely according to their own feelings, and dance becomes the body's instinctive feedback, not a stage performance for others. Most dancers are immersed in their own movements, and the binary relationship between watching and being watched is greatly weakened. At this time, the human body is the carrier of individual feelings, not the display object for others to examine [3].

Visual effects and various sensory devices further amplify the immersive effect. The rave venue is generally equipped with lasers, strobe lights, abstract image projection, smoke and other strong visual effects. All kinds of elements jointly build a unified sensory field that envelops the whole audience, creating an immersive spatial environment. Continuous rhythm and visual stimulation will weaken individual self-awareness and make people enter a state of selflessness [2].

The influx of young people, especially Generation Z, has made the local visual expression more prominent. Chinese aesthetics, cyberpunk aesthetics, anime and other subcultural symbols are widely used in venue layout. Y2K (Millennium) retro aesthetics is also popular again in various rave scenes [2]. The Y2K trend arose from the late 1990s to the beginning of the 2000s. Its unique aesthetic system was born in the background of the initial development of digital technology and the public's expectations for the development of science and technology. This style combines future technological images with exaggerated and joking visual elements. The iconic features include metallic colors, plastic glossy textures, exaggerated fonts with a strong sense of design, and various patterns from online virtual space. At present, many rave participants will choose Y2K-style clothing, which in a sense carries the pure and simple imagination of the public in the early years of the future.

3.2. Escape from order

Contemporary Chinese rave culture has reconfigured the spatial and temporal organization of rave culture. Compared with the early form, the current event venues not only include traditional commercial nightclubs, but also a large number of special venues with local characteristics. Daytime activities and night parties develop in parallel [2].

Traditional nightclub venues continue to play an important role, and temporary pop-up events are becoming more and more popular. Rave events are no longer confined to fixed venues. On the domestic video platform Bilibili, blogger kk_kylekraig released a series of documentary videos documenting his DJ performances in convenience stores, restaurants, fruit shops, and even chicken farms, transforming these everyday spaces into temporary rave venues [4]. Similarly, the suburban woodland has also been developed as a temporary activity site, used as a leisure green space during the day, and turned into a dance floor at night. In addition, the only six-square-meter street newsstand in Tianjin was transformed into a miniature nightclub [5], and there was also a venue of techno dance music integrating classical architecture and religious images in Chongyuan Temple in Suzhou [6].

Daily life places and characteristic cultural spaces have been transformed into immersive environments and sensory spaces. This flexibility in venue selection does not only reflect creative experimentation, but is also the result of the culture's adaptation to the external environment. Rave activities take place across urban and rural settings, opening up the immersive experience of daily reality and artificially constructed environments. This spatial transformation reflects the Dionysian tendency to transcend rational boundaries [1]. By setting up the activity in an unconventional site, participants can open up a temporary exclusive space, break the standardized order of daily life in the city, and build an experience field that is briefly detached from conventional perception.

The rise of daytime rave has further broken the rigid temporal organization of urban life, and the boundary between institutionalized schedules or regulated daily routines and free experience time has gradually blurred [2]. At the same time, the rave site can temporarily eliminate social class differences: regardless of occupation and social status, all participants share the same physical space, and the class identity is weakened here. Groups with different social backgrounds coexist in one place and no longer deliberately highlight their own social labels. For some groups, such places can provide less binding space for marginal identities.

Interview data suggest that many individuals who have a sense of alienation in daily life can establish a new sense of belonging here. Vis, a fan, shared his experience of participating in the hearing-impaired-friendly BassBath event. In her opinion, the rave culture has had an anti-mainstream core since its birth, and the nightclub space can provide a relatively safe and free environment for diverse groups to express themselves. She proposed that "the dance floor should be one of the most inclusive places" [7], which confirms the characteristics of underground nightclubs that have long offered a refuge for niche identities and diverse expressions, echoing the theory of Dionysian sacrifice celebrations and carnival [3]. In this scenario, the differences in social hierarchy are temporarily dissolved, and the established social order and rules are also temporarily suspended.

3.3. Gentle rebellion

Compared with the Western social context, the domestic rave culture has long been under a stricter regulatory framework. With the improvement of the cultural exposure and the deep integration into the business system, its originally promoted decentralization characteristics and sensory experience exploration continue to be transformed by regulatory rules, capital logic, venue operators and online platform algorithms [2]. At the same time, rave culture is deeply intertwined with the commercial electronic music industry, and the boundaries between rave, night entertainment, trendy clothing and social media circles are becoming more and more blurred. To this day, even if the form of activity and aesthetic orientation are far from the core values, the word "rave" is still widely misused [2].

Contemporary Chinese rave culture has always been subject to various structural constraints, and its development path has also been shaped by it. On the one hand, the mobility of practitioners and

participants is extremely high. DJs, visual directors, VJs, dancers and event planners generally have unstable incomes and limited space for long-term career development. Many people turn to the commercial track or completely leave the circle. The frequent change of personnel makes it difficult for the local cultural vein to continue to precipitate [2]. On the other hand, the number of offline event venues fluctuates wildly. High rents, compliant operating costs, and uncertainty of the policy environment continue to squeeze the survival space of relevant venues; a large number of venues were closed during the epidemic, and the consumption mode changed in the post-epidemic era, further exacerbating the problem of insufficient stability of the industry [8].

Most rave communities as a whole show closed characteristics. The cognitive bias of the public and external control pressure promote activities to rely more on private interpersonal networks. Some activities will be posted on public social platforms such as RedNote, but most of the complete and reliable activity information is only released through channels with higher accuracy for fans, such as WeChat official account, the organizer's self-built WeChat group, venue community, and merchant communication group. Participants can obtain complete information such as ticket rules, admission norms, artist lineups, venue changes, venue etiquette, etc. from such private channels, which is also the common communication logic of most foreign subculture activities; smaller-scale and more underground-oriented activities are highly dependent on private domain channel flow information. The organizer will not release publicity materials on a large scale and take the initiative to attract new participants. It often only releases posters, disseminates information within the inherent circle, and relies on acquaintances in the circle to introduce each other. This communication model raises the threshold of participation and further exacerbates the isolation of the circle [2].

The commercialization process of the domestic rave industry has also caused the differentiation and separation of aesthetic styles within the circle. The lack of stable and long-term local communities hinders the deeper development and inheritance of the culture [2]. In public opinion, rave culture is also often interpreted one-sidedly. It is simply equivalent to night pastime and sensory entertainment, and the historical connotation, social significance and cultural value behind it have received little attention. Cognitive misunderstandings at the public level, in turn, strengthen the relevant control and make it difficult for the public to fully understand the intrinsic value of rave as a kind of subculture practice [2].

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates how contemporary Chinese rave culture modernizes the Dionysian spirit through three interrelated dimensions: aesthetic features, new forms of time and space, and a gentle form of rebellion shaped by regulation and commercialization.

From the aesthetic perspective, rave transforms the Dionysian spirit, originally a symbol of classical mythology, into a lived, embodied experience through immersive sensory experience. In spatial and temporal terms, rave events create a temporary zone, so that participants are temporarily removed from the ordinary rhythms of work, social identity order and urban daily life paradigm. At the same time, Chinese rave culture is not presented as a purely confrontational counterculture. Under the joint effect of regulatory constraints, commercial operation and platform communication mechanism, its rebellious form is more moderate and negotiated, maintaining the free space of body expression within the existing social structure.

In summary, the local Chinese rave culture is neither a simple reproduction of the Western rave system, nor a direct reproduction of the classical Dionysian spirit, but a local reconstruction and reinterpretation of the Dionysian ecstasy experience in the specific context of contemporary Chinese urban culture. Taking the Dionysian spirit as the theoretical framework, this study reveals the

constraint, adjustment and creative transformation process experienced by foreign subculture in the local environment. Research shows that Chinese rave culture is a composite cultural form that integrates high-intensity sensory experience, experimental spatial practice and social consultation, which provides a new analytical perspective for exploring how young people can win physical autonomy and collective emotional resonance in a standardized urban governance environment.

References

- [1] Nietzsche, F. (1872/2000). *The birth of tragedy*. Oxford University Press.
- [2] Zhao, Y. (2023). *Shaping the meaning of Chinese music subcultures*. Örebro University. Örebro.
- [3] Friesen, C. A. (2001). *The raving body narratives: Dancing ecstatically betwixt Nietzsche's Apollo and Dionysus* (Master's thesis, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada). Retrieved from <https://ucalgary.scholaris.ca>. doi: 10.11575/PRISM/16325.
- [4] The homepage of kk_kylekraig. (2026, July 11). In *Bilibili*. <https://space.bilibili.com/522384125>.
- [5] Lv, Z. (2023, March 1). A street newsstand where you can dance: Embodying the rave dreams of young people. *WeChat*. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/0BfpRy4X2x_oIXcD_I5RvQ
- [6] An electronic music festival in a bamboo grove at a temple. (2025, October 19). In *RedNote*. <http://xhslink.com/o/5EXKYmIONRv>
- [7] Cao, S. (2024, October 10). The only rave party for the deaf in China — It is so wild! *WeChat*. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/5kZXynjP1o__iciSpANX8g
- [8] Zhang, W. (2026, January 14). Have the underground music clubs in your city closed down? *RedNote*. <http://xhslink.com/o/6B927AStBji>