

Dancing on the Ruins: Raving Bodies and Youth Futurity in Contemporary China

Yu Pei

MA, Anthropology

Department of Anthropology, The New School for Social Research

Acknowledgement

This research was made possible by the generous support of the India China Institute through the Starr Student Award, for which I am sincerely grateful. I also deeply appreciate the ICI faculty's guidance and encouragement throughout the process. Their support allowed me to spend meaningful time in the field, follow my curiosity, and further develop my research.

Introduction

The project is based on a three-month fieldwork in several cities in China, including Guangzhou, Beijing, and Shanghai. By focusing on underground rave scenes, it discusses the affective and social conditions that bring people into those scenes, as well as the desire and imagination generated from raving experiences. In current studies, rave is often theorized as a spiritual or ritualist experience, a form of escapism, or a resistance to mainstream culture. However, in my fieldwork, I focus more on the sense of disorientation and different forms of self-unmaking in those scenes.

The desires and people that gather around rave are, of course, diverse. While I am interested in certain specific affections in rave scenes. It was not always happy parties, nor simply escapism, nor was it just a resistance to mainstream culture. At times, it was entangled with self-destructive impulses. Repetitive techno music, overnight

dancing, drug overdose, and dissociation create forms of embodied experience of raving. From this, I draw out several recurring themes: happiness, future, and youthfulness, as well as the forces that suppress them and the way of living that grows within and against that suppression.

My fieldwork was marked by several moments that brought these tensions into view.

“Say no to drugs”

In a club in Guangzhou, I noticed the overlapping scars of self-harm on a group of teenagers. In the bathroom, someone asked my friend if he had any drugs. They were referring to things like dextromethorphan, a cough suppressant, and memantine, a medication used to treat Alzheimer. At that time, drug overdose became relatively common in parts of Guangzhou’s rave scene.

Overdosing on these substances was not primarily about relaxation or spiritual experience. More often, it was a way of slowing down consciousness and reaching a temporary state of dissociation. They could also cause irreversible damage to the body, affecting organ function, memory, and cognitive abilities. For most people, it could never be a pleasant experience. Around that time, clubs in Guangzhou were frequently targeted by the police after young people overdosed or cut themselves inside. Unlike the widespread use of psychedelics in rave scene in the United States, China has strict controls on drugs. Police would sometimes raid underground clubs and launch compulsory drug tests. In the past two years, local police have also become more involved in regulating overdose, treating it as an illegal act.

While we were talking about overdose in a club, a man passed by me and said: “You need to listen to their pain.” Then he disappeared into darkness. His words have haunted me ever since.

Later, I realized that far more people around me had overdosed. For some, deliberately seeking out pain was a way of easing a different kind of psychic pain and

gaining control over their own body. It often came together with all-night raves that pushed the body to its limits, and heavy drinking.

Many of the stories followed similar patterns: toxic family and intimate relationships; violence experienced in compulsory “internet addiction” correctional centers or psychiatric hospitals; neglected and unrecognized mental illness; self-harm and attempts to escape from home. At other times, the stories were more about a profound sense of being cast out by the society. Political depression and trauma, queer group, and vulnerable youth under the high unemployment rate. All these fragments of life came together into an overwhelming sense of having no future.

This connects to the end-of-the-world imagination of rave. Early studies of Western rave scenes have often associated them with utopian visions and the possibility of a better future under a different regime after “the end of the current world.” However, in my fieldwork, the emotions lingering in rave scenes are more about longing for an end and rejecting the future itself- the future that has long been tied to the grand narratives of national progress and neoliberal familial aspirations, almost like an imperative, obscures the pain and struggle of individuals.

For many young people, the promises of having a bright future have gradually collapsed amid political disillusionment and economic decline, excluding them from the path to success that once promised to be attainable through hard work, while everyday suffering is rendered invisible and denied by mainstream narratives. To hide in the darkness of the club, where linear time is disrupted by repetitive music that seems to have no end, is to hide from a future that feels impossible to reach.

A limited future, a youth with an end

This sense of the future was also closely tied to the experience of being young. When I asked H why she went to raves, she told me that underground clubs gave her a strong sense of “youthful energy.” She could see queer friends express themselves boldly through the way they dress which they might not do in everyday life. In the dark, smoke-filled clubs, they could hide from the social norms that constrained them,

and enjoy a dancing night without feeling judged. Staying up all night at a rave felt like a kind of luxury, a celebration of the privilege of having a young body.

But to be young was to know that it would not last; it carried within itself the certainty of an ending. And so many things seemed to remind us of that approaching end: More queer communities have been forced to shut down, social media accounts have been banned, physical spaces closed, and violence against sexual minorities continues to occur. People keep leaving, looking for somewhere else to shelter. Communities would not last forever under growing political pressure. The future we shared was already limited.

In July, a queer party was called off by the police. They said that too many LGBTQ+ people reposted the event, and therefore it's a high-risk gathering.

But what is "high-risk"?

The party, the all-night dance. The unregulated bodies and pleasures. To be in the same space with people who understand their own loves and desires, to connect with each other. Or simply to see and hold one another.

"For us, creating and embracing happiness itself is radical."

K said.

Final Remarks

This paper examines underground rave in contemporary China as an embodied engagement with the condition of refusing to imagine a future. While rave has often been theorized as a site of utopian imagination and future-oriented resistance, the scenes discussed here suggest a different orientation. For some Chinese ravers, overnight raving, mental dissociation, drug overdose, and self-destruction operate as ways of continuing to live within a social order experienced as unlivable, while also reclaiming a sense of control over the body facing overwhelming psychic pain.

Focusing on the imaginaries of youth and the future generated within rave scenes, as well as the ways these imaginaries become forms of painful attachment and are

shaped by external forces of constraint and suppression, this article attends to rave scenes as sites where multiple desires and forms of power intersect, while opening up questions about the unsettling youth futurity in contemporary China.