

# Escape and Hide: On the Chinese Youth Subcultural in the Post-Subcultural Period from James C. Scott's Perspective

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## Abstract

In the 21st century, the study of youth subcultures needs the joint involvement of multiple disciplines, and the theoretical experience of anthropology is particularly worthy of reference. James Scott, an American anthropologist, explored civilization from a unique perspective, which is of great value not only to the human study research before World War II, but also to the analysis of contemporary cultural groups. From Scott's "subaltern perspective", the Chinese youth subculture group in the post-subcultural period is examined. Autonomous escape and active hiding are the two major characteristics of the group, and a series of cultural phenomena resulting from this are mostly the strategic adaptation of the youth group to the mainstream culture. At present, maintaining a certain degree of relevance and distance in the same space is a feasible choice for mainstream cultural groups and youth subcultural groups at this stage.

## Keywords

James Scott, Subaltern Perspective, Post-Subculture, Hidden Text, Youth Subculture Group

## 1. Introduction

Since the 21st century, with the change of the global political and economic environment, modern society has grown increasingly diverse. As an indispensable part of modern culture, youth subculture also shows a brand new appearance with the information and social change. In 2001, the symposium on *Post-subculture Research: Popular Culture and the Making of a New Post-subculture under its Influence* held in Vienna, recognized the professional term "post-subculture" as culture research, marking the creation of post-subculture theory. In 2002, the

closure of the Department of Cultural Studies and Sociology at the University of Birmingham also showed that in the context of global economic and cultural integration, subcultural studies have taken on a multi-dimensional trend, and it is difficult to use their theoretical paradigms to interpret the current subculture phenomena. In this regard, many post-subculture researchers try to construct a post-subculture research system through theoretical reflection and criticism of the Birmingham School, internal analysis based on current phenomena, and emphasis on the function of emerging media. At this time, it is of great significance to extensively absorb relevant experiences from various disciplines to re-examine the characteristics and formation of youth subcultures.

In recent years, American anthropologist James Scott, who has sparked an academic upsurge with the introduction of his works to China, has greatly inspired other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences with his unique research perspective and interdisciplinary practice. In works such as *Weapons of the Weak*, *Seeing Like a State*, and *The Art of Not Being Governed*, Scott repeatedly uses his unique “subaltern perspective” to deconstruct those everyday behaviors.

When the youth subculture has been integrated into and surrounds our lives, perhaps we should try to turn our attention and use the theoretical tool of “subaltern perspective” to interpret the generated consciousness from the bottom up, so as to continuously explore the youth subculture in depth. The unique social circle of cultural groups.

## 2. Youth Subcultural Groups from the “Subaltern Perspective”

Scott’s bottom-level perspective is to interpret the operation strategies within the circle from the standpoint of the disadvantaged group, and at the same time examine the rules of the state and capital through the eyes of the disadvantaged group. In *The Art of Not Being Governed*, the author describes a stateless space that is often geographically inhospitable, making it difficult for states to establish and maintain their authority, and mountainous regions usually have conditions that facilitate these “stateless space”.

In this, the author treat the relatively free stateless population of foragers and farmers in the “mountain” as a group actively fleeing state rule, placing them in contrast to the low altitude agrarian economies of the state. It also analyzes the daily production, political form, and cultural appearance of the mountain people, and traces the path of their “self-barbarism” in order to pursue the minimization of oppression. As one of the largest stateless spaces in the world, the highland area in the mountains of Southeast Asia, Zomia<sup>1</sup>, has become a paradise for escapists due to its unique geographical and natural conditions. Their

<sup>1</sup>“Zamia”, geographically referring to the mountainous region of Southeast Asia, named by Willem van Schendel, a pioneer in the study of this area, the term is very popular among the Tibe-to-Burman-speaking highlanders on the Indo-Bangla-Myanmar border, it means “the remote mountain people”.

sanctuary followed their own laws, thus isolating the infiltration of the valley civilization. Scott pointed out the cultural characteristics of the mountains in *The Art of Not Being Governed*, to a large extent, the economic, political and cultural organization of these groups is a strategic adaptation to avoid being integrated into the national structure (Scott, 2019). Of course, we cannot apply the art of escaping domination directly to youth subcultures. After World War II, the world has changed dramatically. Young people's escape from society mostly stems from their own individual needs, and their escape is not individualized direct separation, but still has the characteristics of conformity and a certain collective nature. The choice of escape is also mostly the result of the intertwining of active and passive factors. However, we still cannot deny that Scott's vision is forward-looking and prescient, and looking at subcultural groups from his perspective will lead to a more unique and comprehensive judgment.

When viewing the youth subculture from such a perspective, the author is surprised to find that the youth subculture group in the postmodern period has similar characteristics. Each subcultural circle has its own unique operation mode, communication rules, and even created specialized language and terminology to distinguish people from the same circle and outsiders, and use identifying features, such as possessions, specific behavior, related speech to distinguish whether the participants are senior, novice or layman. For example, the popular subculture group in recent years—"fan circle", will evaluate the membership level based on whether you surf Weibo, do data, vote, and anti-criticism, and there are different levels for different fans. Name distinction, such as "casual fans", "true love fans", "character pairing (CP) fans", "girlfriend fans" to refine the internal partition. The attitude of the circle towards its members and the outsiders will show obvious differences. The tolerance and rejection of the circle are often filled with remarks and behaviors, with the intention to maintain their small group and draw a line between them and their own peers. For members of subculture circles, such behavior is not so much a passive escape from the mainstream culture, but an active distancing within a certain time and space. When they are in their own circle, they use completely different modes of communication than when they are in a mainstream culture, such as abbreviations, specific nouns, pictures and symbols that only members of the circle can understand. Such a communication method is hardly an escape from a specific person or a group, but more a strategic adaptation to avoid being assimilated by the mainstream culture. They generate the space by themselves, in which they keep the circle running in accordance with their own guidelines, and the members follow the rules and enjoy it. Such space separates and operates as Scott tells of "Zomia", the difference is that, the subcultural circle does not rely on geographical space to escape, but uses modern information technology to draw a gap between self, group and society.

The members of the subculture circle are more interested in the protection of the security and interests of the circle in which they belong, to a certain extent,

even more than the mainstream culture. When outsiders try to interfere, the strength of resistance and the consequences they provoke are often incalculable. Such a strong sense of protection is very similar to the situation faced by valley civilization when Scott discussed in the lecture *Why civilization can't climb hills* (Xin & Zhao, 2013). The difference is that the two sides in this case share a geographical space, and confrontation between youth subcultural groups and mainstream groups is mainly on the level of ideology.

The intrusion into the escape space, the loyalty to the subculture group, and the dependence on the space will arouse great stress responses in the members, leading to the joint attack of the intruder by circle members. For example, in the "AO3" event, the website was maliciously reported and the user was abused, resulting in the damage to the shelter space and the collapse of the spiritual pillar of the relevant members. The related remarks became more and more violent, resulting in cyber violence, which hurt the personal safety of the members, so that all subcultural circles felt a sense of crisis and jointly attacked the relevant personnel. The incident continued to spread, formed public opinion, and finally put the incident into examination and discussion under the mainstream culture and social scope, and produced a series of chain reactions and even became a landmark event. It is hard to say which side won or lost in this protracted tug of war, and both parties have suffered damage, but we can also glimpse the defense of the subcultural circle members, and convey their determination to protect their members to the outside world through various ways. If members of the mainstream culture have adopted a judgmental, defensive and a resistant mentality to "Boys' Love (BL)" before, this event allowed more people to be exposed to the products of this niche culture, and, due to sympathy for the victims, view the subculture circles with a more tolerant attitude, and enhance the acceptance of the subculture, and the continued release of film and television of this subject also positively confirm this trend.

With the continuing improvement and progress of the material conditions and spiritual civilization of real world society, the youth subcultures are increasingly opening up. Although the postmodern youth subculture still shows confrontational characteristics toward mainstream culture and society, it is different from the rebelliousness and resistance of the 1960s and 1970s. The postmodern youth subculture is a confrontation with a tendency of communication and exchange, it is confrontation with a counter-influence on mainstream cultural expectations. It is undeniable that under the influence of the capital market, some members of the subcultural circle will package their own uniqueness, integrate into the wave of capital operation, actively cater to the mainstream culture, and even make certain compromises to seek economic and social interests, but on the whole, in the post-modern period, the youth subculture circle as a space for active choice, has an increasing influence on mainstream culture, and members of youth subculture groups are also constantly stepping out of the circle, actively engaging the public.

### 3. Active Escape and Hidden Texts: Representation of Postmodern Youth Subcultural Groups

In the postmodern period, the dividing line between youth subculture and mainstream culture has blurred, and subcultural content has spread to communication platforms and activity fields of mainstream culture and influences its audience groups. Subcultural content such as ancient style, animation, fan culture, etc constantly enter public awareness and mainstream culture in various forms, affecting people's cultural and entertainment life. In this context, the subcultural groups as defined by the Birmingham School wherein they are united by Beat Generation, have clear boundaries with, and are resistant to the mainstream culture, is not suitable to describe these groups, at the same time it also differs from what some post-subculture researchers believe that (subculture) has become a kind of non-political and consumption-based narcissistic performance that does not violate the mainstream ideology (Yan, 2019). If we look at these subcultural phenomena through Scott's subaltern perspective, we find that it is closer to a short-lived spontaneous escape. When faced with overwhelming pressure and shackles of reality, the youth group will carry out stress response and self-isolation. They will take the initiative to leave the mainstream cultural environment and escape to a more liberal subcultural space to seek self-release. As Scott mentioned in *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, the forms of peasant resistance, such as laziness, sabotage and confusion, are different from open and large-scale resistance activities, while the small-scale and light resistance behaviors are more routine.

In the face of power capital exploit, the price of resistance is often beyond the ability of rebellious groups to pay, so direct questioning in public and organized resistance is extremely rare. However, the negative reactions of individuals or small groups, such as pretending to obey, omissions, deception and complaints are often used to express their dissatisfaction and behavior through non-cooperation in some aspects. For example, the popularity of nihilism among youth in recent years is a result of the generation Y and generation Z's dissatisfaction with real life. Many images and words with strong pessimistic fill the Internet, showing the collective anxiety of contemporary youth. From the "Ge You slouch" in physical expression to the Pepe frog and long-legged salted fish in WeChat emoji, the pessimistic, giving up and drifting with the flow has filled the life of young people's live. They express their dissatisfaction and escape from social reality with different images and frustrated words. Another example is the term "laid back" on the Internet. The so-called "underestimate everything and aloof with the world" is actually a coping mechanism in response to the inability to achieve personal goals in the real world. He treats everything around him with low desire, and the importance of ideal, responsibility and personal value is selectively ignored. Young people return to create a culture related to their current status, separating them from mainstream culture through self-mockery, satire, black humor and so on. Unlike the positive energy of mainstream culture narrative,

the aimlessness of “laid back culture” seems closer to the youth group living situation, facing economic pressure, class solidification, young people constantly experience doubt, frustration, anxiety and even despair, underestimate attitude became a life-saving straw, let them content with the status quo, reconciliation with the outside world. In today’s developed social media, “laid back youth”, “laid back love”, “laid back life”, and a series of words such as “whatever”, “no preference”, “couch potato” also express the pessimism and the psychology of evading reality.

In modern society, the powerful force of capitalism has always played the role of the ruler, and the elite class has the absolute right to speak, while the lower class has always been the subordinate, with no power to compete with it, and no freedom of discourse. The open interaction between dominant and subordinate, which Scott calls “open text” (Wang, 2015) has a strong will to dominate, which inevitably oppresses the subordinate, so the interaction is inevitably stylized and ritualized. The voice of subordinates in such texts is limited, and it is difficult to completely freely express their personal will. It is not so much a two-way interaction as the balance of interests between the two sides. In the communication with a performance nature, both sides constantly try to find a balance point to complete the interaction and achieve a certain degree of understanding. In this disguised interaction and communication, the intentions of both sides are hidden to a certain extent, especially the subordinates, which hide almost all the real but unfavorable emotions to obtain the recognition of the ruler. Based on this, the capitalist side can usually get even beyond the expected results. The authenticity of the textual content produced by such an interaction is naturally questionable.

Faced with social and financial pressures, young people lack the tools and courage to resist positively. When the open text cannot express people’s true feelings and internal needs, the members will turn to the hidden text to seek validation. The hidden text, mentioned by Scott in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* is an expression presented in a specific place and for a specific group of people. Compared with large-scale public places, hidden texts mostly exist in small groups or in specific spaces. Such a small scale is conducive to the hidden texts. If the scales are slightly larger, they are disguised as works of art to seek the space and rationality of their existence. In these specific spaces, individuals can find a certain degree of freedom by avoiding the control and monitoring of those in power. It should be pointed out that hidden texts exist in both elites and commoners, including not only their non-public speeches, but also their daily behaviors that contradict the open texts. For example, for farmers, hidden texts can include tax evasion, shirking, while for the elite, hidden texts might involve luxury, bribery, and privileged manipulation. The placement of the boundary between the two has been a struggle throughout the ages. In contemporary society, hidden texts include civilian class behaviors such as playing hooky, network ridicule, and activities in the subcultural circle, as well as elite class behaviors such as time buyout, unspoken rules, and labor

exploitation. There has been a constant struggle between the two, from breaking the unspoken rules to the hot discussion of the “007” and “996” work systems, a large number of anonymously published microblogs, continuous super talk posts, various jokes and short videos on the media, the conflict between hidden text and open text is everywhere. For example, as the animation work *BoJack Horseman*, the source of many classic quotations of nihilistic culture, many situations in the show are supplemented by various expressions, and even set off a wave of humor, depression and dark style. Young people hide their ideas in open or undisclosed texts, gently but persistently pushing against the external environment.

When looking at the activities of young people from a subaltern perspective, you will find that there are a wide variety of youth subcultural circles, which are excellent shelters for hidden texts. Among all kinds of niche art, young people can temporarily abandon social constraints, release one’s self, seek their inner desires and identity, and to a certain extent, it can achieve the effect of escaping from the pressure of reality. Compared with the mainstream cultural field, the subcultural circle to which young people belong can give them a sense of safety when expressing their thoughts. Special images and symbols build a bridge of communication between young people. The use of the same content, the expression of similar views, and the support from others allow the members of the circle to form close connections with each other. The text content has a certain hidden nature, and there is no specific leader, no real list of members, no real-name system activities. Relevant members are under a relatively safe protective shell, and they can communicate with each other smoothly, without worrying about identity exposure and real world consequences. In many cases, words and pictures with various unclear meanings express their views and opinions on a social phenomenon and a specific event. The emotions, resentments and depressed personal characteristics that are suppressed in mainstream society are expressed in a specific space to achieve catharsis and psychological decompression. In the face of powerful national and social machinery, such resistance may well be futile, but for individuals, such a release can be particularly important.

When young people get inner release and emotional relief in their circle, and then re-enter the mainstream cultural field, they usually present a face of the more harmonious reality. The reason we pay attention to the hidden text is not to include it into the category of open text, nor to attempt to displace it, but to acknowledge the value of its existence, and give it the necessary space to exist. Youth subculture is not only a way for vulnerable groups to resist mainstream hegemony, but also for subcultural groups to integrate into more avant-garde mainstream forces. Society has been paying a great deal of attention to young people and their many subcultural circles in hope of knowing more about young people. The phenomenon of youth subculture contains young people’s resistance to established rules, measurement standards, value realization and social constraints. Within the subcultural phenomenon rests young people’s demands from reality, interpretation of value, basis of their ideals and their hope for life.

When these things cannot be expressed in the mainstream field, they will become hidden texts and breed in the subcultural space.

For such hidden text, the best methods of communication must not forcibly break through from the capital level, attempt to control or to eliminate, partially or in whole, the space of its existence, such that the power of the ruler permeate through to all aspects. Instead, we should focus on building a more equal and secure communication channel, weaken the will to dominate among the elite, and communicate sincerely with subcultural groups, so that the hidden text can be entered into the open text without fear, so that the subculture can coexist with mainstream culture and build a free, fair and safe communication environment in the new era.

#### **4. Shielding or Blending: Contemporary Choices for Youth Subcultural Groups**

Today, with the rapid development of the Internet, global cultures are becoming increasingly integrated, and the makeup of youth subculture is more diversified. It is no longer a settlement of passive escapees from society and mainstream culture, but a special space created to temporarily liberate members from existing standards. In this space, youths respond to each other's ideas and concepts, and gradually form small intimate groups. Members have a large degree of freedom to live in such groups, and with the division and expansion of the space, the subcultural circle they are in has gradually mastered a certain realistic power of discourse. Since the beginning of the new century, youth subcultures have moved from a marginal existence into the sight of mainstream culture. It can be said that its space and content have achieved unprecedented development. It is no longer a distant, vague and highly virtual cultural form, but has permeated into our lives, intermixing and integrating with the mainstream culture. It constantly changes people's attitudes, breaks down barriers, transcends boundaries of nation, culture, gender, age and class, to become a global cultural landscape.

Standing in the currents of time, youth subculture groups in the post-subculture era are also facing many difficulties and choices of maintenance and development. Should they keep a distance from modern society and block the penetration of mainstream culture, or take the initiative to close the relationship with the public and try to integrate into the mainstream cultural society? For youth subcultural groups, this is a problem that they must face and respond to. When we place ourselves in this group and interpret the problem from the characteristics, media and phenomena of the subculture from the subaltern perspective, we may find new answers to this question.

Based on the characteristics of different kinds of youth subcultures, the important factor attracting young people is the variety of subcultures. Among the uniform voices, the appearance of something different from the common existence will undoubtedly attract attention. However, young people are in a time of increasing self-awareness, and constant confrontation between individuals and society, self and group. Different behaviors and cultural forms have a special at-



traction to them. In the face of heavy real world pressures, the anxiety and tension of contemporary youth are difficult to put in reality, and niche groups can make them temporarily unmask and disguise, put down their real world roles, heartily reveal their own personality, express their attitude and opinions. Based on their differences from the mainstream culture, subcultural groups collectively try to create a new value system to confirm a new collective identity to strive for their own cultural space (Huang, 2011). And actively stay away from the rules and regulations of society, avoid the field of mainstream culture, and isolate themselves from the vision of mainstream culture. Both scattered small groups and hidden communication discourse are designed to avoid the tentacles of the real world, and to create a private and niche world as much as possible away from public interference.

With the rise of “social media”, young people gradually speak out on various platforms and express their demands. Subcultural groups also seize the emerging media and civilian platforms that break the restrictions of time and space for content dissemination and audience acquisition. Various emerging network communities, circles and tribes have sprung up on the Internet, and all kinds of APP have become the main settlements and display platforms for members of various groups. In such a vast space, cultural circle can grow freely, the audience increases exponentially, each subculture form has a fixed community group, circle organization more orderly, content becomes more diverse, gradually becoming groups the mainstream culture cannot ignore. Through social-media, the individual’s “belonging and love needs”, “self-esteem needs” and “self-actualization” (Maslow, 2013) needs can be satisfied to a certain extent. The reason why subcultural groups show different features is closely related to the change in social media. When the satisfaction of the virtual world is greater than those of the real world, there is no doubt that the Internet will become extremely important, and such a transformation will also have substantial social and cultural impacts. For example, the “Chinese Ancient Style Circle” has been welcomed by popular culture, and the related variety show *Beautiful Youth of Chinese style* has attracted numerous viewers; the large number of BL TV programs released also shows that LGBT culture is being accepted by society. Some other examples, animation *The Founder of Diabolism* and *Heaven Official’s Blessing* have been widely praised, TV program *The Untamed* has attracted countless fans. And the once controversial “e-sports culture” has gradually received positive feedback with the development of information technology. The film and television works *Dear, Beloved* and *Accompany You to the Top of the World* are not only close to the subculture, but also a show of goodwill to the youth group behind it. In the face of such a phenomenon, mainstream cultural groups have been trying to guide, absorb and even partially learning from youth subcultures, hoping to have certain intersections and resonance with subcultural groups, but always seems to be ineffectual. Any era has its own unique cultural landscape. For the world in the new century, perhaps the coexistence and integration of mainstream cultural groups and subcultural groups is its unique cultural landscape. Both continue to

advance with time and the development of society. People move between the two cultures and stay in the cultural environment according to their own needs. For subcultural circles, the public can try to treat and communicate with respect and non-interference, without trying to introduce subculture into mainstream culture, and do not require mainstream culture to imitate certain elements of subculture to attract young groups. To the subcultural group with enough tolerance and understanding, respect the rational value of their existence, and give young people a certain space and freedom to escape. For the subcultural circle that hopes to communicate with the mainstream culture, they should maintain a respectful and reciprocal open attitude, fully respect their own characteristics and autonomy, encourage them to integrate into the mainstream cultural content, and give certain resource support to inject fresh blood into the mainstream culture. Reviewing the youth subcultural groups from Scott's perspective is from the bottom up, observing the community and the mainstream society as the group members. Compared with analyzing it from a mainstream perspective, such a review is not only closer to a specific group, but also can give a more accurate and realistic depiction of the reality of the research subjects. The best way to understand it deeply is to be in it, so that you can understand what the subjects think, and this is also the applicability of the anthropologist Scott's subaltern perspective theory.

The Internet has gradually linked global culture together. Under such a social trend, it is impossible for young subcultural groups to completely block the mainstream cultural field, and there is bound to be communication and interaction between the two. However, the long established preconceptions of mainstream culture are difficult to change in the short term, and there is a certain degree of exclusion of youth subcultural groups, which also leads to conflict and separation between them. At this time, it is a feasible strategy for the two cultural groups to maintain communication and to maintain a certain distance and correlation with each having their own freedom. As the times change, the two will surely develop a more suitable way of cooperation, and the overall cultural landscape will gradually assume a new aspect.

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