The New Discovery of the Subculture “Punk”

篇名:
次文化的探索－龐克

The Discovery of the Subculture: “Punk”

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I. Introduction

Not a few people love to dress themselves in preternaturally avant-garde outfits on the street. Their Mohawk-shaved sides with a strip of hair running down the middle especially draw people’s attention. These people have appearances of “liberty” or "chaos" that looks like Birds of Paradise. They label themselves as Punk.

Punk, in fact, contains several definitions. According to Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2005), Punk can be “a culture” popular among young people in the late 1970s. It can also be “a young man involved in criminal activities.” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2009) indicates that Punk refers to “a usually petty gangster, hoodlum, or ruffian” or it implies “a young man used as a homosexual partner especially in prison.” No matter what Punk is, it is for sure that Punk used to be important culture that reflected rebellion and opposition to authority in the past.

Punk can be traced back to New York and England in 1976. People say that Punk culture was formed because people wanted to express their strong dissatisfaction over the tyrannical authority by wearing bizarre, discordant, and conflicting clothes. However, when time goes by and liberty replaces dictatorship, the subculture of Punk seems still there. Therefore, we want to know what ideas in punks’ mind and why they insist on dressing themselves in the Punk style. Do they really know the meaning and the history of Punk while they are dressed in Punk? What makes the subculture trend important and accepted in Taiwan? Three directions assist us to figure out these questions. First, we studied the references and hoped to get more knowledge about Punk culture around the world and specific events held in Taiwan. Second, we interviewed some punks. Third, we did a questionnaire survey on ordinary people to see their viewpoints of Punk.

II. Thesis

A. Definitions of Punk

The word, Punk, contains many meanings and it changes from century to century. In 1618, the word “punk” was a strange kind of overcooked corn, and it didn’t taste well. At that time, Punk was viewed as “ashes.” But the meaning was gone. In 1899, Punk referred to “worthless” in the George Ado’s story. During the World War II (1939 to 1945), people said that Punk was the group of the teenagers with bizarre clothing and distinct body decorations or the ones who expressed their music with mad, fury, and aggressive. People at that time remarked, “Street punk, a hoodlum.” O’Hara Craig (2005), the author of the Philosophy of
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_Punk_, consequently coined the term of Punk. According Craig, Punk can be a noun, which means a disabled person, a whore, rubbish, laziness, gayness, and even marijuana. It also can be an adjective, which implies foul, useless, unhealthy, valueless, arrogant, social against, rebellious and cynical.

Crystal Dawn Bright (2006), on the other hand, points out that Punk emerges from rock music and it is gradually formed “Punk subculture,” including music, ideologies, fashion, visual art, dance, literature, film, and activities. But if you think Punk is merely a kind of fashion, a kind of specific clothing, a kind of specific music, and even a kind of latest style, you are wrong! As said by Bright, Punk actually is a mind of rebellion and revolution, but to this day, Punk has become a kind of lifestyle and community that promotes its concepts. In its denotation, Punk creates their own music to express their feelings, their own way to survive in society, their own groups to live up in the world, and their own culture to show their existence. In Sounds and Fury Richard Hell has said (2004), the best known as frontman for the early punk rock band, argues that “Primary punk will turn into a kind of consciousness and a concept of style, but it rots a kind of style and fashion.” This transformation is speeded up by the public, even by Punk people. For that reason, Punk’s uniqueness has become a kind of trend and attracted teenagers in the recent years.

B. The Spirit of Punk

Punk was regarded as a subcultural trend in the mid-1970s. During the World Wars II to 1970, the bleak economy and high unemployment rate in England and in America had caused a striking impact on people. Most of the people, especially teenagers, could not endure the suffering and did not have any hope for their future. They became punks who tried to find an escape to give vent to their anger and dissatisfaction. In the meanwhile, the capitalist system had entered the most serious crisis and there appeared revolution. The revolution brought circulating oppression that promoted punks to change their direction to become Anarchists. The belief and principle of Punk were based on Anarchy that they abandoned authorities, government, and the rulers. In other words, they enjoy complete freedom without any government. And it became a subculture group, and this group created more and more Punk’s symbols and icons. It was especially given this high profile by English designer, Vivienne Westwood and the ambassadors of Punk—The Sex Pistols.

Among the participants in this subculture, there is an important group called “Loudoun,” the ideal incarnation of Anarchy Punk. They have had a great deal of contribution to Punk, such as playing the music, making the movies, publishing the newspapers, and running the record trade. All they have done is to rebel the society. Because of all these Punk things, the public
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start to notice Punk. Many of them even accept Punk and regard Punk as a kind of fashion. Businesses are happy to commercialize the subculture. Nevertheless, most of the Punk people are anarchists; they rely on this system to make people transform into Punk. These Punk people show clear equality of treatment about sexual discrimination, homosexuality discrimination, racial discrimination, and still species discrimination. They consider all about these are harmful, non-rational and unacceptable.

Punk is against social convention. Punk people consent to anarchy. The importance of their belief is to drive themselves to think of themselves, do themselves, not to follow the convention of the society, and even create their own rules to survive in this world. Punk people use some elements make their stage and show their opinion directly, including the DIY (do it by yourself) style and non-conforming attitude. To fulfill their ideal life, they make DIY to relieve themselves particularly and they feel powerful to achieve their goal. By doing DIY, they can send out rebellion, individuality, freedom and their own creation. Besides, Punk people expect that everyone in equal is the importance part in their viewpoint of the liberal theory. They think that everyone has the same right living in the world. For example, the sexual discrimination, homosexuality discrimination, racial segregation, and species discrimination should be rejected and pushed out of this world.

D. Punk’s Attractions

1. Music

Many people don’t know what “Punk Rock” is. They usually mistake “Punk Rock” as “Progressive Rock.” Punk Rock is a kind of primitive and frank music. There are two features in Punk rock: the lyrics style and the musical instruments. Their songs are usually short and fast. The lyrics are simple. The sounds are rough and raucous and they are spat out and shouted. The content of the songs reflect Punks’ beliefs and deliver the massage in their mind. Punk people use their songs to communicate with the world and tell the world the criticism of the real society and the evil government. To make people realize the beliefs of Punk, the melodies are very basic and simple. Likewise, to make people memorize the songs, the lyrics are often in rhymes.

In fact, during the mid-1970s, Punk Rock was a disordered, ill-bred, and primitive music style turning up in the United Kingdom. It opposed against Processing Rock music, art, rationalists, the tradition of centralized culture authority and capitalism. Many teen boys and girls from the labor class used the music style to express their hatred and protest for everything that they couldn’t bear. Punk Rock contained only ruin and darkness, no bright
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and construction. It was not adorned by phonographic industry. In view of the badly powerful and rough content in songs, melody with the aggressive sound, many radio and TV programs prohibited them. Punk Rock experienced a dark time in history although most of the people nowadays can accept this “extreme” and “gloomy” music.

2. Punk Activity

“Punk Activity” is an activity that draws many people to appreciate for Punk’s beliefs by playing music. Because of the activity, many bands were formed in London in 1975. Among them, “the Sex Pistols” is one of the typical representatives. It is widely credited with the pioneer of the Punk Activity in the UK. When “the Sex Pistols” performed live shows to every academy of art at that time, the audiences were shocked, doubted, blamed, and even fighting. In addition, their dressing, words and deeds, and music style affected the teenagers in England, and promptly spread out to every corner of the world. Afterwards, this craze formed “PUNK ACTIVITY.” In Punk Activity, Punk is not just only music, but also a kind of social group consciousness. They share their ideas and thinking. They create their music, lifestyle, group, and culture. They promote their Punk Activity and expect peace is coming. Ironically, while pursuing freedom and peace, they still insist on the principle: if they want to do, they can do it.

3. Clothes and Ornaments

Nowadays, the trend of Punk is appearing again on the streets. It causes the agreement of lots of fashionable designers and consumers, and then develops part of trend. There are three parts of Punk style in general. First, the style of Punk dress is always associated with decadence, boldness and revolt. And Punk people usually use certain colors, namely red, white, and black, to mold themselves. Punk people also like to wear T-shirts with scrawled slogans that are often marketed in various forms at sex and offense. Second, to make their look unique, Punk people often tear clothing or trousers with a great number of safety pins to hold the pieces together. Expect for the safety pins, they like to use other ornaments, such as velvets, iron chains, zippers, metal, leather products, etc. Many ordinary accessories can be part of Punk dress. In the meaning of this clothing form, it is called “DIY” (Do It by Yourself). It is Punk people that create their own wearing style which is unique and special. Third, they like to have tattoos and piercing holes. All of these Punk features completely overturn the traditional culture in the United Kingdom. Originally, Punk people only want to break the appreciation of the beauty and lives up to a startling and provoking effect, but it fascinatingly becomes a youth fashion. Local teenagers love it.
E. Modern People’s Viewpoints of Punk

1. Punk People

Although we find much information about Punk, we are still curious about whether Punk is just like what the book mentions! So, we first interviewed Punk Chen, who was a senior high school student and played the punk music very well. After the interview, we found that Chen seemed to know the spirit of Punk. However, we also found Chen had his own interpretation about Punk. The following was the summary of the interview with Chen.

a. Why I Become a Punk

Everyone knows the fact that society is full of darkness, chaos, and unfairness, but very few dare to resist it. It is Punk that conveys the strong spirit of rebellion by different means. It is Punk that touches my heart and releases my soul. For example, in the past, almost everyone thought that bass players should be males, not females. However, Punk changed it. To this day, most bass players are females. But Punk is just a kind of spirit attitude; it is not a kind of fashion. People should know the real meaning of Punk, not just blindly follow it. We have to be ourselves even if nobody likes us. Besides, the chord of three notes music attracts me very much. When I first heard about “Sex Pistol’s God Save the Queen,” I felt so enchanted that I would never forget. Moreover, the most captivating part of Punk attracts me that is DIY. DIY means do it by yourself, such as hairstyle, decoration, clothes. The cockscomb head, rivets, and the Dr. Martens boots all make me feel that I am unusual except for piercing and tattooing. I believe that Punk people are scared to be hurt by piercing and tattooing. At least, I do not want to hurt myself. Nevertheless, as time goes by, everything could be possible. Maybe in 2012, astronauts will make up a new style of Punk. For me, Punk makes me feel I am unique and live a special way in the world. I even hope to smash my guitar and scare the passer-by.

b. How Much I Know about Punk

When it comes to Punk’s origin and background, the group of people encounters the unemployment. They want to rescue the fund and lives as boring as poopoo. They want to express their emotions, so they take the guitar on the stage and smash it. They want to smash all of the thinking systems and try to rebuild them. To this day, as far as Punk people are concerned, all of government are cheated the folk’s money, such as “MacDonald,” the symbol of Capitalism. I embrace the Anarchy. If the world didn’t have any government, it would be wonderful. In addition to its origin, I also know there are several colors related to Punk. First,
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the red A: it means Anarchy. Second, black: it means to rebel and resist. Third, green: it represents the environment principle.

2. Common People

After the interview of Chen, we still want to know the feelings of common people. So, we deliver a questionnaire to thirty-one common people about Punk. Table 1 mainly shows why Punk attracts the people and Table 2 shows their viewpoints of Punk.

Table 1

*Impressions about Punk*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impressions about Punk</th>
<th>Positive/Known</th>
<th>Negative/Unknown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First impression of Punk</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General feelings after understanding Punk</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude to Punk people</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of Punk Background and spirit</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearances, including Body piercing and tattoo</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The difference between Rock and Punk Rock</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When we finished the survey, some of the results indeed surprised us. First of all, we found 70% of the people had a negative first impression on Punk. They thought Punk was too exaggerated, fearful, odd and even disgusting. Only 30% considered Punk acceptable because of its cool style. But after they understand the Punk culture, unexpectedly, 70% of the people’s attitude turned out to be affirmative. Nevertheless, they still believed that their family and friends couldn’t agree with them if they were punks. The disagreement included the dressing style and action. In other word, they respected Punk culture but they couldn’t approve of the behavior. Only 10% of the people understood the real spirit and background of Punk. Perhaps it is because Punk is a kind of foreign culture. Concerning the appearances of Punk, 84% of the people disliked and disagreed, especially body piercing and tattoo. It is interesting to find the “unique dressing” of Punk is a disputing issue. Eventually, when it comes to Punk Rock and Rock, many people misunderstand; 62% of them did not know the difference.
Table 2

*Common People’s Viewpoints of Punk*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Like and Dislike</th>
<th>Reasons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The attractiveness of Punk</td>
<td>Clothes &amp; Adornment: 50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Music style: 41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Punk himself or herself: 9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The distaste of Punk</td>
<td>Time consuming: 36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wasting money: 44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Afraid of being the target of gossip: 20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbols of Punk</td>
<td>Skull: 38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rivet: 35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leather: 23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Else: 4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popularity of Punk</td>
<td>Especially show yourself: 81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boring life: 13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resist the government: 6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 2, we found that 50% of the people considered the clothes and adornment of Punk were the reasons to attract people, 41%, music style and 9%, the person. As to the dislike of Punk, 44% of them thought dressing in Punk cost too much money, 36% mentioned time consuming and the others were afraid of being the target of gossip. The symbols of Punk are also very important. We found the first three things that could symbolize Punk were skulls (38%), rivet (35%) and leather (23%). Lastly, 81% of the people agreed that it was self-display that made Punk popular. Ironically, only 6% of them thought it was the rebellion against the government. From these results, we argue that the spirit of Punk in modern people’s mind has changed. People like or dislike almost because of the appearances that Punk brings about.

III. Conclusion

After doing the project, we found that Punk actually is charming subculture. It attracts people by clothing, music, and even spirit. “DIY,” for example, contains a special significance, because Punk people use DIY to create their own costume, such as skull, rivet, metal, velvets, zippers, leather product, iron chain, Dr.Martens boots, cockscomb head, tattoo, and even pierce holes into their skin. These unique and eye-catching ornaments, accessories, and clothes become the reason why people think “Punk” is a kind of fashion. Although DIY also creates their own music whose melody is considered to be full of madness, fury, dissatisfaction to show their feelings, the spirit of Punk seems to be less and less important. In
other words, rebellion, resistance, and revolution can only be found in people’s dressing and somewhat in their music, not in mind. We hope this paper can convey the information and the whole picture of Punk to the people who encounter Punk and to the ones who enjoy being a Punk. We hope people to understand “dressing cannot make up a Punk, but Punk spirit can,” emphasized by Punk Chen who we interviewed.

IV. Reference

1. BBC-h2g2-Punk music in Britain. (2009). <www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A791336>