



Girls of an Art Club - Ho Chi Minh City

## Subculture in Hanoi – Different from the West, Different from the Rest

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Various scenes within Hanoi's popular culture have started to acquire the characteristics of subcultures. What are the factors and attitudes that cause Vietnam's youth to engage in these social niches?

When the reform program known as *doi moi*, which marked the beginning of a market economy in Vietnam, was introduced in 1986, one of its side-effects was a fundamental transformation of society. Over 20 years later, one result of this change is a growing diversity of popular culture in Vietnam. Today, in the continuing process of transition, many young people are seeking for new identities, which some of them find at the periphery of youth culture. Although they constitute only a small minority, these Hanoians are fairly representative of the new values that have developed under the conditions of the *doi moi* era.

During a six-month research project, conducted in Hanoi between 2006 and 2007 and funded by a DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) scholarship, the author tried to find and describe subcultural aspects of Hanoi's contemporary youth culture. The con-

cept of "subculture" as used in industrialized and post-industrialized societies is controversial, and it is difficult to give a general definition of "subculture". Although numerous studies have been conducted in European countries and North America, questions remain as to which groups can be called subcultures and which ones cannot. I have therefore tried to relate features usually associated with the term in Europe and North America to the scenes I found in Vietnam's capital city. This article examines the different groups, the features that make them attractive for some young Hanoians, and the preconditions that brought them into being. With regard to the current stage of popular youth culture in Hanoi, it might be more appropriate to talk about *scenes* with certain subcultural features than about common subcultures. None the less, I will sometimes resort to the simplifying term.

I observed different scenes and

sought to find common characteristics to compare them to one another. I thus came into contact with hip-hopers, graffiti artists, homosexuals, oppositional artists, hard rock and heavy metal fans, illegal motorbike racers, and break dancers. All these groups would deserve to be further investigated; my intention, however, was to find out what the term "subculture" could be understood as referring to, or what it could become, in a Vietnamese context.

During the research process, I focused on shared interests within the groups, normative values of their own, distinctive visual markers, and a common group identity that differentiates a scene from the rest of society that in this context may be called "the mainstream". Furthermore, hierarchies sometimes exist within subcultures, and one concept used to explain how those hierarchies work is that of *subcultural capital*. Following BOURDIEU's concept

of *cultural capital*, this idea by SARAH THORNTON is based on the assumption that degrees of popularity, relations to other scene members, visible markers, actions, or experiences in the subculture are related to prestige among the participants of the scene. The more *sub-cultural capital* individuals are able to accumulate, the higher their reputation in the scene and the more important their opinion about which style is “in” and which is not.

### Traits of subcultural scenes

In Vietnam, subcultural scenes have only begun to emerge during the last 5-10 years, and many of the scenes existing now still lack some of the features usually associated with the notion of subcultures. Probably the most obvious difference between the scenes I came across in Hanoi and those described in Europe and North America is the fact that participants of the local scenes hardly ever distinguish themselves from the surrounding society by the use of visual markers. There are, of course, young Vietnamese with eye-catching (and, in this country, seriously provocative) outfits, hairstyles, or accessories, but even if they imitate styles pre-defined by Western subcultures, they do not necessarily express their affiliation with them. Instead, most current members of Hanoi's subcultures follow the fashion style of the mainstream rather than trying to define a scene-specific one. Then again, it is also interesting to note that a certain style expressing affiliation with a scene does not prevent an individual from taking part in events or entering the social spaces of another scene. A young man I encountered at a hip-hop event organized by the British Council serves as a good example for this: He had long hair and wore torn black jeans with a heavy leather belt and a T-shirt of the popular heavy metal band Metallica. I asked him whether he regularly listened to hip hop music and he denied it. “I like metal better”, he told me. Asked why he had then come to the concert, he explained to me: “It is just something different from the rest. I dislike *nhạc vang* (a kind of melancholic Vietnamese music) and all that. Whenever there is something new, I have a look to find out whether I like it.”

Many young people I talked to thought like that. As access to their own preferred music is often limited in Vietnam and the scenes are quite small, members of Hanoi's subcultural scenes are not as reluctant as those in Western countries to mix with other scenes. The boundaries established between the scenes are not as strictly drawn as in Europe, and the presence of an obvious heavy metal fan at a hip hop concert does not cause the same degree of bewilderment as it might in Europe. The scenes here are less exclusive than those in North America and Europe. On the contrary, their members rather encourage each other and communicate, thereby sometimes recognizing that what they share is the wish to differentiate themselves from the mainstream.

In most of the scenes I examined, the self-awareness of being a group has only just developed in the past few years, and it is not even taken for granted by all of its members. Although the participants are well aware that they share an interest that is rather uncommon, some of them do not yet regard themselves as members of a defined group distinct from the mainstream. Of course, each of the scenes has different ways of allowing its members to gain sub-cultural capital. Whereas illegal motorbike racers can gain credibility by winning races and through their willingness to participate in these events even after suffering an accident, graffiti artists can do so through the size and location of paintings, and hip-hoppers can gain subcultural capital through a knowledge of lyrics of American artists or through their clothing. In the inner circle of those practising and performing break dance, credibility is mainly gained through dancing skills.

What they all have in common is that they are loose formations in Hanoi's society rather than exclusive clubs with clearly defined boundaries. And while some members representing the inner core try to spend as much time as possible within the scene and involved in scene-specific activities, other individuals may be only loosely attached to the group. This is especially true for the hip-hop scene, which has an inner circle of people that constitute a “subcultural core”, who listen and produce music, but also has a vast audience that does not

count as scene members.

Most of those engaging in Hanoi's subcultures are young males between 17 and 25. Hence, in most cases, one could easily argue that these groups are part of the youth culture. The only case in which the age of members is not limited at all seems to be the gay scene, where I encountered individuals of an age range from 18-45. I was also told about younger and older gay men who were considered scene members. The most important reason for the rather restricted age span in most scenes is that the individuals involved need to have a certain degree of spare time at their disposal for on the group-specific activities. After they have taken up work or started families of their own, they often lack the time to do so.

It is hardly surprising that Hanoi's scenes are not at all gender-balanced. As already mentioned, the vast majority of their members are male. And usually, the few women are not treated or regarded in the same way as men. They are also able to gain subcultural capital, but would and could hardly ever claim the same power to define what is “in” and “out” as males, or take over a leading role within the group. This shows better than anything else that these subcultural scenes, though different from the mainstream and equipped endowed with their own values, are never completely separate from the bigger social context.

The participants of youth scenes with subcultural features I found in Hanoi, are for the most part not unwilling to conceive of themselves as being part of their bigger social context. They see themselves as being different from the mainstream, but hardly ever as being outside of society. In the vast majority of cases, the social network within a given scene in Hanoi adds to the one outside, and though it sometimes diminishes the importance of the latter and loosens ties, it hardly ever endangers and virtually never completely replaces it. Attachment to the scene is usually less important than the one to the family, for example. This might be a characteristic trait of Vietnamese subcultures.

### The benefits of subcultural involvement

Given this description of subcultural

scenes in Hanoi, the next chapter will focus on their attraction and fascination for young Hanoians to them. First of all, there has to be a basic interest in the group's specific activity, e.g., a shared preference for specific musical styles. But beside that, my interview partners often pointed to a high degree of boredom in their lives due to the fact that they were not entirely satisfied by the leisure activities available to them. According to them, there is too little social space and opportunity for young people in Hanoi to structure their leisure time independently. The activities with which young people fill their free time, such as playing online games in Internet cafes, for example, seems to be fairly boring for them. So when they find a field of interest that they share with a few others, this makes them feel special in a way. If they find it enjoyable, they will spend more and more time in this special group of people that to some of them seems like a unique circle with special skills or knowledge that none of their peers are able to share or understand. Especially when they perceive that they, or the ones who introduced them to the scene, have the chance to gain a high reputation among the scene members, regardless of their social stance in everyday life, they are likely to enter this social niche willingly.

Despite the feeling of not being completely understood by peers outside the scene, many of them soon realize that the mystique of being special also surrounds them outside the group when they talk to others about their scene activities and scene friends (if they do) and wins them the admiration of others. Many scenes have role models in Western societies, but their own perception of their connecting element (for example, the style of music) and their ways of expressing their membership and enthusiasm differs from the scenes in the West. While trying to copy the West, they generate own scene identities, but still regard what they do as being "Western", and thereby modern. This is very much appreciated, and seen as a marker of independence and maturity.

As mentioned before, the majority of those engaged in the subcultures are young males, and I was often told with a wink: that "the girls like it, too."

Especially those who participate

regularly in big spontaneous illegal motorbike races told me that being a racer is regarded by many females as a sign of masculinity and courage. So, in most scenes, *cherchez-la-femme* is a motive not to be underestimated.

Of course, there are also a couple of female members in the various scenes, and they are interesting objects of research with regard to their male friends' perception of them and the gender relations within the scenes. The deeper the involvement of females in the subculture and the more subcultural capital they gain, the more accepted they are by the males, and the higher their reputation. But that happens at the cost of this advancement is the loss of their femininity, because then they are no longer regarded as "proper girls" whom one could appreciate as a girlfriend.

In order to be regarded as a good girlfriend, it seems, one would have to admire one's boyfriend for his courage and skills when he races, probably even trusting these skills enough to sit on the back of the bike in a race. For a female to drive her own bike is by no means acceptable, because that would not only challenge the boyfriend's driving skills, but his very masculinity as expressed in the race as well. And after all, expressing his masculinity is an important feature of the race to him, as a means to impress "proper girls".

For some females, especially young women, this is another attractive feature of subcultures: to find a place where they can leave the boundaries imposed on them by the society due to their gender. Within the scene, they may be able to find and appreciate the opportunity to do what "proper girls" are not supposed to do - and even gain respect for doing it.

But the main reason for males and females to engage in subcultures is to do something different than the rest, thereby generating and expressing *individualism*. Even if, as argued earlier, common social ties are hardly ever abandoned, by far the most important reason for many subculturally active Hanoians to engage in their scenes is the urge to individualize and emancipate themselves from traditional bonds to a certain degree. This is a comparably new trend in Vietnam's social structure, that can be

traced back to a certain set of preconditions. The same preconditions reveal the social-economical framework from which Hanoi's subcultures evolved and help to understand why the capital city offered such fertile grounds for these scenes.

### **Preconditions for the occurrence of subcultures**

Overall progress has been enormous since the Communist Party started the *doi moi* reforms in the mid-1980s. Furthermore, the increasing diversity of the media has since provided Vietnam's contemporary youth with an input of impressions from all around the world that are still not unrestricted, but fairly broad-ranging.

Additionally, Hanoi had a dense population with a low average age, which meant that a large number of its inhabitants were young and had grown up in the environment described above. For them, the party's call for people to enrich themselves and the ambition to lead the country into a prosperous future was linked to their conceptions of other, economically further developed countries in Asia as well as in the West. The challenge to strive for prosperity was therefore, for many, connected to ideas of modernity and a Western lifestyle. One major factor in this process was access to the internet, which has now become an integral feature in the lives of many young Vietnamese, especially those living in urban areas.

Furthermore, a relatively high number of foreigners come to Hanoi, stay there for months or even years, and promote intercultural exchange. These factors are much more evident in Hanoi than anywhere else in the northern part of the country.

Not only did Hanoi's youth draw inspiration from different lifestyles from abroad, but the growing economical potential also made it possible to follow these trends. In trying to show their modernity, young people started to imitate these new styles, generating social practices and preferences that were, and are, more and more defined by fashion rather than by the limited choices and resources their parents had at their age. Of course, not everybody has been able to follow these new patterns



Michael Waibel 2006

**Get Rich or Die Tryin' (U.S.-Rapper 50 Cent): Young Breakdancers before the Lenin Statue in Hanoi.**

of consumption to the same extent. For the small minority of the upper-class, abandoning traditional lifestyles may have been not only a matter of comfort, but also a way to show that they had escaped poverty that they, too, had to cope with in pre-*doi moi* times. Their example was followed by a then-During this period, a young fashion mainstream was established.

Besides the rise of new values associated with consumption and lifestyle, traditional social values also started to be questioned in a country with a nominally Socialist government and principles and a rapidly growing market economy that is giving rise to increasing social polarization. In this contradictory situation, previously well-established ideas of collectivism as a way to reach collective goals were challenged by individualism, which was much more promising given the new parameters.

For those who grew up during that time - a generation aged between 15 and 30 today - these new values seemed to be the way forward, and it is still too early to predict the long-term consequences of that social change. But since this generation had unprecedented opportu-

nities to shape their lives and were able to choose role models from all over the world, many chose the new, modern, and seemingly individual way of life.

Impressions of other countries, only poorly reflected, were often adapted in a rather uncritical way. The few people who had encountered elements of foreign popular culture and who did not fit into the mainstream of youth fashion, became attracted to the former and sometimes started to imitate or even idolize them. Thus, they established loose circles that gradually acquired the characteristics of subcultures.

### Conclusions

Subcultures, especially in Hanoi, do not emerge in ways that conform to theoretical concepts of subculture. They are triggered by unpredictable events and circumstances, and in the course of their formation, rather casually generate their own values and distinctive markers along the way. But their self-image and identity is partially consolidated by the discourse within the scene as well as the one outside of it. If they had clear concepts as to their identity and what defines them as a group, that could pro-

bably help them gain consciousness, assist them in finding ways to express their needs in a constructive way, and lead to a certain degree of self-organization. This would allow them to utilize their full creative potential and to contribute to creating better opportunities concerning social life and social learning for young people in Hanoi and elsewhere.

Subcultural life is a comparably new phenomenon in Vietnam's capital city. The scenes have permeable boundaries, and are characterized by an intuitive knowledge of their group identities rather than by clear concepts of what defines them as a distinct crowd. But this may change during the ongoing process of social transition experienced by Vietnam's population today. They are the avant-garde of a generation that will soon have to define the future of the country.

### References

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