

The Body as a Field of Resistance Against Power: Negotiation of Power Space from the Perspective of the 'Nail Piercing' Subculture Community

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Abstract. This paper examines body piercing among Chinese youth as a practice of tactical negotiation within networks of disciplinary power. This paper argues that piercing constitutes a situated and provisional claim to bodily sovereignty, drawing on ethnographic interviews with piercers and enthusiasts and engaging with the theoretical frameworks of Foucault, Butler, and the Birmingham School. The analysis traces how piercers navigate medical discourse, aesthetic norms, and spatial constraints through what this paper terms "enclave politics." These are temporary autonomous zones carved out within otherwise totalizing structures of control. The paper concludes by reflecting on the limits of such negotiation. When self-chosen pain becomes routine and subcultural style is absorbed into commodity circuits, the question shifts from whether piercing liberates its practitioners to why contemporary youth must inflict pain upon themselves to experience moments of self-possession.

Keywords: body piercing, youth subculture, tactical negotiation, situational sovereignty, enclave politics

1. Introduction

Body piercing among contemporary urban Chinese youth has evolved from a marginal subcultural practice to a more visible form of self-expression. Historically, bodily modification in China has been stigmatized as criminal and morally deviant. The Confucian classic *Xiaojing* emphasises that the body is received from one's parents and should not be damaged. But the proliferation of piercing among post-1980s and post-1990s generations signals a generational shift. The body is no longer perceived merely as a passive bearer of familial heritage. It has become an autonomous field of identity performance.

This transformation unfolds against a broader structural context. China's millennial generation numbers approximately 385 million. This cohort has grown up amid rapid economic growth and internet penetration, and its degree of individualisation far exceeds [1]. Simultaneously, this cohort faces economic deceleration, soaring housing prices, and a tightening labour market. The result is the indefinite postponement of conventional adult milestones [2]. Scholars have termed this

condition "waithood." It is a structural suspension between childhood and adulthood where social recognition is deferred and self-identity urgently requires affirmation [3].

Against this backdrop, body piercing takes on a dual character. Piercers assert a provisional bodily sovereignty through the voluntary endurance of pain. They operate within the interstices of medical discourse, occupational discipline, and familial expectation. Yet this sovereignty is always borrowed rather than owned. It is effective within the piercing studio, but dissipates upon exit by parental surveillance, employer dress codes, and medical pathologisation. Existing research tends to frame such practices as heroic resistance against mainstream power or as mere aesthetic consumption. This binary obscures their lived complexity.

This article proposes an alternative framework. This article argues that piercing is a form of tactical negotiation, drawing on Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power and the Birmingham School's understanding of popular culture as contested terrain. Youth produce temporary and situated bodily sovereignty through active bodily modification in specific spaces. This sovereignty remains perpetually incomplete. It is fragile and inevitably subject to commercial incorporation and institutional discipline.

2. Theoretical framework

The sociology of youth subcultures has long been shaped by what this paper calls the Hebdigean dilemma. Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* established the foundational grammar. Subcultural style functions as symbolic disruption, as noise against the dominant culture's semiotic order. Hebdige also diagnosed its inevitable fate. The safety pin, the ripped t-shirt, the Mohawk are all destined for incorporation. First comes commodity reappropriation, followed by ideological neutralization. The punk becomes a fashion spread. The deviant becomes a marketing demographic [4].

This narrative has shaped much subsequent analysis. It has produced a binary that proves remarkably difficult to escape. Piercing is either resistance, a heroic assertion of autonomy against medical pathologisation and workplace discipline, or compliance, a consumer choice indistinguishable from any other. The body becomes merely another surface for branding. Neither pole captures the ethnographic texture encountered in this study's fieldwork.

Foucault offers a more supple starting point. Discipline is not merely repressive. It is productive. It does not simply prohibit certain bodies. It actively fabricates the category of the normal body, docile, useful, and legible. Medical discourse, aesthetic norms, and occupational dress codes form what Foucault calls a triad of normalizing judgment. Each reinforces the others. Yet Foucault's later work on technologies of the self introduces a crucial complication. Within the field of power relations, subjects can and do operate upon their own bodies, souls, and conduct. The goal is not to escape power, which is impossible. It is to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality [5]. The piercing needle is one such technology. It does not liberate the subject from discipline. It reclaims, for a moment, the right to be the one who operates.

Judith Butler pushes this further. Bodies are not pre-given substrates upon which culture writes. They are materialized through repeated and citational practices that enforce and reinforce regulatory norms. The body that belongs to me is not a natural fact. It is a performative achievement. It requires continuous reiteration to sustain. This has a double implication for piercing. On the one hand, the claim "this body is mine" is itself a performative utterance. Through its very enunciation, it brings into being the sovereignty it claims. On the other hand, because performativity requires repetition, the pierced body must be continuously re-presented. It appears in the mirror, in the selfie, in the gasp

of friends, in the comments section. Without this iterative audience, the claim falls silent. The body that is mine is never mine alone [6].

Craig Lockard's formulation becomes indispensable here. In his study of Southeast Asian popular music, Lockard describes popular culture as a constant battlefield where resistance and incorporation perpetually wrestle. There are no once-and-for-all victories [7]. This is not a metaphor of war with a decisive end. It is a metaphor of permanent, low-intensity conflict. The piercer does not storm the barricades of medical discourse. She slips through its gaps. She does not overthrow the aesthetic regime. She temporarily suspends its jurisdiction in a studio, a bathroom, or a filtered photograph.

Karin Barber's methodological intervention is equally important. In *A History of African Popular Culture*, Barber rejects the question of whether popular practices constitute real resistance. Instead, she asks what people do with the cultural materials available to them [8]. This ground-up approach redirects attention from abstract classification to situated action. The piercer is not a resistor or a dupe. She is a bricoleur, assembling meaning from the debris of medical warnings, social media aesthetics, peer recognition, and the visceral immediacy of pain.

This paper proposes negotiation as the analytic framework that threads these theoretical strands together. Negotiation does not presuppose an outside to power. It does not surrender agency. It operates in the interstices. It operates in the studio where the piercer redefines normal. It operates in the bathroom where the tongue stud is hidden before a family dinner. It operates in the social media post where the caption "this is mine" solicits the very recognition it claims it no longer needs.

3. The body as a field of power: the political economy of pain

Three institutional discourses converge in defining the acceptable body in contemporary China. These are medical, aesthetic, and occupational. Each operates through a distinct logic. Their combined effect is to produce a body that is simultaneously visible and controlled. It is available for labor, legible to surveillance, and docile to governance.

Medical discourse pathologizes piercing as self-harm. As one studio owner explains, piercing is not clearly categorized. It is said to be medical, but it does not really reach that level of medical seriousness. The ambiguity is telling. The state's failure to regulate produces not freedom but a zone of juridical uncertainty. Piercing studios occupy a precarious existence. They are not banned, but not legitimized either. The medical gaze does not need to criminalize. It merely needs to raise the question, to introduce the possibility that the piercer is not a subject making a choice but a patient exhibiting symptoms. This is the clinical gaze, in Foucault's terms. It is the power to constitute the subject as an object of knowledge, and thereby foreclosing certain forms of self-definition [5].

Aesthetic norms operate more diffusely but no less powerfully. The piercer with eleven ear studs, two eyebrow rings, and a tongue stud described her deliberate limitation of facial piercings, citing scar recovery and parental acceptance as practical concerns, and adding that her personal aesthetic simply does not favour facial piercing in high numbers.. The normal face is not prescribed by law. It is sedimented through thousands of micro-interactions, job advertisements, dating preferences, and familial expectations. The piercer does not so much reject this norm as negotiate with it.. She calculates the optimal distribution of visibility and concealment.

Occupational discipline tightens the knot. The studio owner noted that some guests mention work environments or family restrictions, and therefore need to pierce in hidden and unnoticeable places. The body in the workplace is not a site of self-expression. It is a tool of production, and tools must be standardized. The piercer who hides her studs during an internship at a hospital is not inauthentic.

She is practicing what this paper calls situational sovereignty. This is the recognition that the claim "this body is mine" has a geography, and that geography is not of her own making.

Against this triad of normalization, piercing offers a paradoxical response. It is the deliberate embrace of pain. But the pain is not the same. Pain from military training is externally imposed. Its meaning is assigned by others. This disciplines the will. Piercing pain is self-chosen. Its meaning is self-assigned. This is mine. The contrast is not between oppression and freedom. It is between two modes of relation to pain. In one, the subject is the passive bearer of meaning. In the other, she is momentarily its author. Yet this authorship is itself circumscribed. As one piercer reflected, when piercing can be completely detached from all grander concepts, only then can one truly experience a sense of freedom. The condition of freedom is recognizing that one is not, in fact, free.

4. Spatial negotiation: enclave politics and the geography of sovereignty

If the body is a field of power, it is also a field of space. The piercer cannot exercise bodily sovereignty everywhere. She must create or find what this paper terms enclaves. These are semi-autonomous zones where the normal rules are temporarily suspended.

The piercing studio is the most obvious such enclave. Its location is itself strategic. It is located in commercial-residential apartments offering low rent and private, near universities and metro stations. It is not exactly hidden. It is embedded. The studio owner described their practice as deliberately public yet physically sequestered. It is a small and niche practice that has never been formally recognized. This liminal status, neither fully illegal nor fully legitimate, creates the conditions for a provisional reversal. Inside, the client decides the placement. The piercer offers only aesthetic advice. Do not put overly large gems everywhere. The normal rules of bodily decorum are not abolished. They are bracketed, held in abeyance for the duration of the procedure.

But the enclave is temporary. The needle withdraws. The client steps back into the corridor, the metro, the family apartment. What follows is a complex choreography of spatial management. The piercer with eleven studs described her domestic negotiations. She chooses to pierce and bears the corresponding consequences, such as needing to truly negotiate and reach mutual understanding with her parents. This is not the closet. It is the switch. The tongue stud is removed before the Spring Festival train home. The short bar is inserted after the hospital shift ends. The body becomes a map of differential sovereignty. Each zone is governed by its own regulatory regime.

Social media introduces a third and more ambiguous spatiality. The piercer's social media post is simultaneously a declaration of autonomy and a solicitation of recognition. Half the comments say "so cool," and the other half ask whether this will affect job prospects. The digital enclave is porous. The gaze that validates is the same gaze that surveils. The piercer who feels alive when the needle passes through is, in the next moment, calculating the algorithmic return on her vulnerability. This is what Butler means by performativity's dependence on iteration. The I that feels alive requires the you that witnesses it [8].

Paul Saucier's concept of the third thing illuminates this spatial complexity. In his study of Cape Verdean youth fashion, Saucier describes how young people piece together a third thing between given identities. They are neither fully African nor fully American, neither fully local nor fully global. Their sartorial practice is hybrid and refuses the binary [9]. Chinese piercers similarly do not express pre-existing selves. They perform selves into being through the very act of spatial navigation. The third thing is not a stable identity, but a continuous practice of stitching together incompatible demands.

5. The limits of negotiation: performance, incorporation, and the paradox of freedom

Every enclave has its limits. The studio can be reported. The post can be censored. The parent can demand removal. More insidiously, the practice itself can become its own constraint.

The trajectory from choice to routine to performance is clearly observed in this study's fieldwork. One community member described it with disarming honesty. After too many choices, it becomes routine. Now she does not know where to pierce next, as if she is performing for herself. The self that began as the agent of choice has become the audience for a performance it no longer controls. This is not false consciousness. It is the dialectic of self-technique. The technology that was meant to produce sovereignty has produced its own form of subjection.

Commercial incorporation operates alongside this internal routinization. Piercing tutorials garner millions of likes on short-video platforms. Accessories sell by the tens of thousands on e-commerce platforms. The studio owner was candid. They are running a business. As long as they do not cross certain bottom lines, such as minors or strong family opposition, they are making money. The subcultural style that once marked difference becomes a market segment. The early adopter who leaves the group, saying that everyone is doing it now and it is meaningless, is not a snob.. She is mourning the devaluation of a symbolic currency she helped create.

This brings the analysis to the deepest question. Does piercing, beyond being a body canvas of self-expression, contain a hidden demand for recognition, an insistence that exceeds the practice itself? The answer, this paper believes, is yes. The piercer who says she suddenly feels alive is not merely describing a sensation. She is describing the shock of being recognized, if only by herself, if only for a moment. In a structural context where young Chinese face credential inflation, housing unaffordability, and the employment precarity of the thirty-five-year-old crisis, the social recognition of adulthood is indefinitely deferred. Piercing becomes a form of self-recognition in advance of social recognition. It is a premature, partial, and necessarily private claim to the status of agent.

But this recognition does not need to overthrow anything. It only needs to exist. As one piercer put it, when piercing can be completely detached from all grand concepts, only then can one truly experience a sense of freedom. The paradox is striking. Freedom is experienced precisely when one stops demanding it, when the practice is stripped of its political ambition and reduced to the pure fact of having been chosen.

6. Conclusion

This paper argues that body piercing among Chinese youth is best understood as a form of tactical negotiation within networks of disciplinary power. By tracing how piercers navigate medical discourse, aesthetic norms, and occupational dress codes through spatially contingent practices of concealment and display, the analysis seeks to move beyond the Hebdigean binary that has long structured subcultural studies. The concept of situational sovereignty, provisional, borrowed, and always subject to erosion, offers a more precise vocabulary for describing how young people in structurally suspended positions claim moments of self-possession without presuming to overthrow the conditions that deny it.

This sovereignty is never stable. It depends on the continued existence of enclaves—the studio, the bathroom mirror, the filtered photograph— whose boundaries are perpetually threatened by commercial incorporation, familial surveillance, and the routinisation of choice into performance. The piercer knows this. She is not duped. She is doing what she can with the materials at hand, on a battlefield where no victory is final.

The deeper question, however, is not what piercing means but why it has become necessary. When a young person must inflict pain upon her own body to feel, however briefly, that she is the one who decides, this reveals the reader less about her than about the structure that withholds such recognition from every other domain of her life. The metal ring is not a banner of rebellion. It is a temporary ceasefire agreement in a war that continues, has always continued, and will not end with her.

This study is limited by its reliance on a small, urban, middle-class sample and by its cross-sectional design, which cannot capture how piercing practices and their meanings shift over individual life courses. Future research might trace these trajectories longitudinally and extend the analysis to rural and working-class youth, for whom the stakes of bodily negotiation may be differently configured.

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