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An exploration of skateboarding subculture in Jinan, China.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since its invention in California in the 1950s as an alternative to surfing (Slee, 2011), skateboarding has attracted generations of gravity-defying youth around the world, including myself. In fact, I grew up skateboarding in the streets of my little hometown in north-eastern Italy with a group of friends who, like many other kids around the world, enjoyed the freedom that skateboarding gave them. Indeed, the attractiveness of skateboarding goes beyond flying in the air with a wooden board under one's feet. Skateboarding unites people, creates communities and gives people a purpose. Although it is undeniable that it presents athletic aspects, skateboarding is much more than just a way to keep fit, and the line between sport and youth culture is often blurred. Participants share common values and practices, regardless of where they are on the planet, and China is no exception, as proven by recent studies (Li, 2018; Sedo, 2010).

Skateboarding has been described by Chinese participants as a “marriage without a romantic relationship” (Li, 2018, p. 118) to indicate its inherently foreign nature, as it was “imported” to China from abroad. One of the first people to bring skateboarding to the country was Joe Eberling, an American skateboarder who moved to Beijing in 1986 to study at university and soon started skating around town teaching people how to ride (Eberling, 2008). Eberling affirmed that at the time so little was known about skateboarding in the country that there was not even a word in the Chinese language to describe it. Skateboarding slowly attracted the attention of young generations and in 1989 *Sanjiaomao* 三脚猫 (Cat with three legs), the first group of skateboarders in China, was founded in Beijing (Li, 2018). In 1990 the Golden Dragon Corporation started selling skateboards in China in collaboration with Powell Peralta, an American skateboard manufacturer (Sedo, 2010). Although not being the latest models, these boards fueled the needs of young Chinese skaters and helped popularizing skateboarding in the country's principal cities. In addition, more and more kids were exposed to skateboarding through the distribution of local and international magazines and videos and the organization of the first contests and events in main Chinese cities. Finally, in the new millennium the advent of the Internet facilitated popularization of skateboarding subculture across the country (Li, 2018; Sedo, 2010).

Another important aspect of Chinese skateboarding can be found in the physical characteristics of most Chinese cities. Indeed, skateboarding and urban architecture are tightly intertwined (Borden, 2001; Chiu, 2009; Nolan, 2003; Slee, 2011; Snyder, 2012; Stratford, 2002); in China the constant evolution and expansion of cities provides limited possibilities for street skateboarding. Marble ledges, smooth pavements as well as low levels of law enforcement against skateboarding have attracted many foreign skate companies and teams to the country (Li, 2018; Sedo,

2010). However, this boom in popularity does not come without a catch. On the one hand, it provides great exposure for skateboarding in China, on the other hand, all the attention that China is receiving as a popular skateboarding destination is not always welcomed by local skateboarders (Sedo, 2010). Skate spots getting “blown-out” by being skated on too much being physically ruined, or becoming the aim of tighter controls, with security guards assigned to certain areas known to be frequented by skateboarders are some of the negative consequences of skateboarding tourism. However, the increased interest towards China manifested by transnational companies and skate teams, brought also positive implications. A number of foreign skate companies have entered the Chinese market and at the same time, the country is seeing an increasing number of national businesses involved in skateboarding. Every big city can count at least one skate shop and skate companies (e.g. Society Skateboards, Gift Skateboards, Vagabond Skateboards); these are the signs of the constant growth of the skateboarding community in China.

Skateboarding in China has changed a lot since 1986; for starters, it now has a Chinese name (滑板 *huaban*, literally “sliding board”) and so do skaters, who call themselves 滑手 *huashou*. Its popularity has grown as well as the business behind it, with an increasing number of transnational companies looking at a slice of its market, as well as local shops and companies, being increasingly present in smaller cities as well, such as Jinan. Moreover, in recent years government agencies have started taking an interest in skateboarding, promoting it as a sport and pushing for a nationalization of the whole process of formation and selection of athletes. In 2004 CESA (Chinese Extreme Sports Association) was founded with the aim of managing and promoting extreme sports in the country. CESA and other government related associations have been strongly criticized by the skateboarding community in the past, even leading to the boycott of competitions (Li, 2018; Sedo, 2010). In fact, participants of grassroots cultures such as skateboarding, can have difficulties accepting external top-down control. Indeed, only time will tell what the future of Chinese skateboarding will look like.

In recent years the topic of skateboarding in China has attracted the attention of a number of foreign media outlets (e.g. Vice, South China Morning Post, Huck, Jenkem). While some publications feature participant insights focusing on the local skateboarding scene (e.g. Huck, 2016; Vice, 2017) others (e.g. Vice Sports, 2015), mainly portray China as a sort of skateboarding Mecca for foreign skaters to explore. Moreover, as I will discuss in this thesis, both academic and non-academic publications have directed their attention to China’s biggest cities (Shanghai, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Beijing) where skateboarding has received heavy foreign influence, being the destinations of choice for the organization of skateboarding events and for foreign skate troupes to visit. I have therefore decided to explore skateboarding in a more marginal area of China and chose Jinan as my research ground, to discover the aspects that connect the skate scene in a medium-sized Chinese provincial

capital to the global skateboarding community and if it presents unique features. This thesis will therefore answer a rather straightforward research question: what are the characteristics of skateboarding subculture in Jinan?

I believe subcultural scenes need to be studied from the inside, building a close relation with participants in order to understand their perspective and customs. I use participant observation, non-participant observation and semi-structured interviews as main research methodologies. Moreover, I refer to relevant academic literature to support and compare my findings with studies by other scholars.

The thesis develops as follows. In the second chapter I will look at literature on subcultural studies, youth cultures and on the different features of skateboarding, both in the context of western countries and of China. The third chapter will focus on the research methods and on the setting in which my study was conducted, followed by a chapter in which I provide useful background information on the cornerstones of skateboarding in Jinan: skaters and locations. The fifth chapter will analyse the aspects that skateboarding in Jinan shares with other skate scenes in China and the world, as well as similar practices that can be found in other subcultures. Finally, in the sixth chapter I will discuss the characteristics that set the Jinan skateboarding community apart from other scenes previously analysed by other academics, and the reasons behind such differences.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The arguments presented in this thesis are based on existing literature ranging from subcultural studies theory, to specific research on youth culture in China and on skateboarding. Because this thesis focuses on skateboarding subculture in Jinan, presenting both its peculiar characteristics and features shared with other subcultures and skate scenes alike, it is important to understand how subculture studies have evolved and what is intended with the term subculture. The concept of subculture is difficult to define and has been approached in a number of different ways, as shown by Haefnler's (2013) and Williams's (2011) studies. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Chicago school represented one of the first waves of subculture studies, focusing on urban deviance and analyzing the criminal aspect of youth cultures. It was later followed by strain theories studies, presenting subcultures as the result of the coming together of marginalized people and presenting arguments that paved the way for the future of subculture studies. Strain theories scholars believed that subcultural participants had an inverted set of values that opposes them to the mainstream. In the 1970s in the UK, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham studied subcultures in a period of transition, focusing on social class and on the emergence of working-class youth cultures. Style is a central theme in CCCS studies and it represents the way subcultures manifest themselves. Prominent CCCS scholar Dick Hebdige (1979) indicated subcultural style as the form of clothing, language and attitude that subculture participants use to define their identity and set themselves apart from society as well as other subcultures. CCCS academics were criticized by following generations of scholars for the lack of a hands-on approach to the scenes they were studying. Contemporary subcultural studies do not represent a homogenous school of thought but rather an evolution of the work of previous academics.

Contemporary scholars use participant observation often drawing from their personal experience having been involved first-hand in the subcultures they research (e.g. Li, 2018; Slee, 2011; Thornton, 1995; Xiao, 2015). Williams (2011) illustrates the core concepts of contemporary subcultural studies as (1) style, in the form of language, clothing, rituals, music; (2) resistance, as a sign of opposition to existing power relations; (3) space and media: culture is strongly tied to space, both in its physical and virtual incarnations; (4) societal reaction: as members of subcultures tend to separate themselves from the mainstream, society presents often negative biases towards them; (5) identity and authenticity: a common theme also with previous generations of scholars. As the next chapters show, these features apply to skateboarding subculture in Jinan as well.

Finally, I use Haefnler's (2013) definition of subculture as a baseline on which to base my analysis of skateboarding in Jinan. Haefnler's based his approach on years of evolution in the study of subcultures, presenting a working definition of subculture as "a relatively diffused social network

having a shared identity, distinctive meanings around certain ideas, practices and objects, and a sense of marginalization from or resistance to a perceived 'conventional' society (Haenfler, 2013).

Over the years, academics have approached the topic of skateboarding by a number of different angles. Firstly, it is important to mention that, although research on skateboarding has been conducted in different locations, the majority of scholars have focused on skate scenes in Western countries including the USA (Beal, 1995, 1996; Beal et al. 2003; Chiu, 2009; Howell, 2001; Németh, 2006; Snyder, 2012; Slee, 2011), Australia (Bradley, 2010; Lombard, 2010; Nolan, 2003), the UK (Woolley, Hazelwood & Simkins, 2011) and Canada (Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie, 2005). Academic attention towards skateboarding in Asia and China in particular is certainly more limited and recent and as of now consists of Li's (2018) and Sedo's (2010) works.

Among the number of scholars (Beal, 1995, 1996; Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie, 2005; Li, 2018; Slee, 2011; Wheaton & Beal, 2003) whose works focussed the subcultural characteristics of skateboarding. Slee's (2011) work on skate subculture can be considered a clear example of contemporary subcultural studies. By using his insider status as a skater in his favor, Slee presents a complete picture of the "values and practices that differentiate it from the dominant culture" (Slee, 2011, p. 3) and breaks down the main features of skateboarding culture. Snyder (2012) argues that skateboarding presents elements that are common to previous definitions of subculture. He supports Becker's (1963) idea that members of alternative cultures share interests and beliefs different from the 'mainstream', extending the concept to skateboarders (Snyder, 2012). In line with Slee's (2011) arguments Snyder affirms that "skateboarding is a subculture with its own language, skill set, world view and set of values in which skaters self-identify as members of an alternative subculture" (Snyder, 2012, p. 314). Moreover, both scholars highlight the main requirement needed to be part of the skateboarding subculture, which is the act of skateboarding itself. In order to be a skateboarder, looking like one is not sufficient, that is why 'posers', who constitute the lowest step in Slee's (2011) representation of skate hierarchy, are not considered part of it. Ability and commitment are therefore the demarcating factors separating those who are part of the subculture and those who are not.

Resistance and authenticity are the cornerstones of a number of subcultures and, in the case of skateboarding, scholars have not failed to analyze these themes (see Beal, 1995, 1996; Beal & Weidman, 2003). In skateboarding culture, authenticity and resistance are manifested through participant control and the de-emphasizing of competition, two values shared by participants that set skateboarding apart from any other sport (Beal & Weidman, 2003). In fact, although skateboarding is a physical activity, the line between subculture and sport is blurry. Skateboarders often oppose the kind of rivalry present in other sports and these behaviors are carried out even in skateboarding competitions, where participants do not seem to care about the result and take part for reasons that

are often different from the competition itself (Beal, 1996). By internalizing these values, participants show their commitment to the subculture, that represents a lifestyle rather than a single aspect of their existence (Beal & Weidman, 2003). Skateboarders often help each other learning new tricks, cheer when others succeed and do not take themselves too seriously if they fail. It has been argued that, although skateboarding is a male dominated sport, participants construct an ‘alternative masculinity’ that steers away from more traditional male stereotypes of competition and macho behavior (Beal, 1996). Skateboarding has been associated by the public with nonconformity, in the form of drug use, disregard for public property, low work commitment and anti-capitalist consumer culture (Bradley, 2010; Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie, 2005). However, nonconformity in skateboarding is valued more as a means of self-expression than as an act of rebellion as an end in itself (Wheaton & Beal, 2003).

Another characteristic that has been thoroughly discussed by scholars (Beal, 1995, 1996; Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie, 2005; Slee, 2011) is the unbalance between the amount of male and female skaters. One study in particular shows the difficulties that female skateboarders encounter in being accepted as part of the subculture that they love (Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie, 2005). They are often seen as inferior (Dupont, 2014) having to work harder to prove their ability and fit in. At the same time, male skateboarders do not seem concerned by this inequality and view the lack of female participation as normal, thus uncsciously engaging in sexist behavior, although often involuntary. Regardless, female skateboarders share much of the values and beliefs that are common of skateboarding subculture such as nonconformity, disregard for competition and emphasis on self-expression (Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie, 2005).

Skateboarding is divided into two categories depending on where skaters choose to practice, street skateboarding and park skateboarding. Skateboarders generally prefer naturally existing places (public squares, parking lots, streets etc.) as opposed to purposely built ones (skateparks) (Chiu, 2009; Németh, 2006). Park skateboarding is seen as “a conformist way of using space within a designated area” (Chiu, 2009, p. 35). Indeed, the relationship between skateboarding and urban environment has caught the interest of many prominent scholars (Chiu, 2009; Howell, 2001; Németh, 2011; Nolan, 2003; Woolley, Hazelwood & Simkins, 2011). These studies show how skateboarders, by using public place as skating ground, provide an interpretation of public infrastructure that is different from the purpose it was designed for. Benches, ledges, rails, curbs and stairs acquire new meaning in the eyes of skaters. Street skateboarding is seen by skaters as more authentic; the street provides endless creative possibilities, it is liberal and real (Chiu, 2009). Indeed, skateboarding on public property presents a number of challenges both for skateboarders and for local governments. Németh (2006) uses the case of LOVE Park in Philadelphia to document the dynamics created by the skateboarding community and the government’s response in order to manage it. His study shows how this



relationship is in constant evolution; skateboarders are portrayed negatively by authorities in order to justify their removal from public property but are treated as a resource when they produce value for the city (Németh, 2006). Other case studies of local governments acting to manage skateboarding include Nolan's (2003) and Woolley, Hazelwood and Simkins' (2011) works on street skateboarding in Australia and the UK respectively. The popularity of skateboarding has led many local governments to build skateparks to accommodate the growing number of skateboarders (O' Connor, 2016). The theme of skateparks has been tackled by a number of scholars (Bradley, 2010; Chiu, 2009; O' Connor, 2016). Studies show how skateparks are used as a double-edged sword by governments: on the one hand they satisfy the skaters' needs and on the other they serve the purpose of reducing delinquency and keeping skateboarders away from public property (Bradley, 2010).

Finally, although the subject of skateboarding in China has been greatly covered online, academic literature on this topic is still quite scarce and, as of today consists of Sedo's (2010) Li's (2018) contributions. Sedo (2010) presents a brief history of skateboarding in China and shows how the internet and the advancement of technology have facilitated the formation of a collective Chinese skateboarding identity. Focusing on the present and future of skateboarding, he argues that the authenticity of Chinese skateboarding is under threat by the introduction of the sport in the Olympics as the state would enhance its control over the skateboarding scene, potentially compromising it. Sedo documents the strong response of Chinese skateboarders against governmental interaction and the intended nationalization of skateboarding towards which institutions are pushing. The attention that is drawn upon the skateboarding scene in China is seen by Sedo (2010) as a double-edged sword. On the one hand transnational companies have helped the growth of Chinese skateboarding by investing in the industry and sponsoring skateboarders and events, on the other the advent of 'skateboarding tourism' represents a possible menace with skate spots being 'blown-out'. Li (2018) draws upon Sedo's (2010) considerations by expanding the scope of his research exploring Chinese skateboarding from the perspective of skaters, subcultural entrepreneurs, transnational corporations and government agencies.

Li (2018) updates Sedo's (2010) claims in regard to the governmental incorporation of skateboarding. In fact, the change of leadership at CESA as well as the introduction of skateboarding in the Olympics has led to "complex power struggles between key agents" (Thorpe & Wheaton in Li 2018, p. 225). Li (2018) sees the inclusion of skateboarding in the Olympics as a potential turning point for Chinese skateboarding. In fact, although transnational corporations have worked towards expanding the youth market in the Chinese skateboarding industry, they have failed to make a commercial break, with some of them pulling out and others reducing their investment (e.g. Nike). The opinion of a considerable chunk of the skateboarding community has shifted towards realizing

that the promotion of the sports element of skateboarding is the most efficient way to develop it (Li, 2018). However, debates are ongoing, and even though the skate community is more receptive of government interaction, strong sense of identity, and grassroots values of subcultural authenticity remain intact. That is why the success of government intervention, both locally, through the inclusion of skateboarding in development projects, and nationally, through the management of the industry and events, is highly dependent of the good communication between participants and institutions. Nevertheless, the majority of the skateboarding community, in particular more seasoned skaters that experienced past conflicts with authorities, still struggle to come to terms with government intervention in the world of Chinese skateboarding and would rather cooperate with commercial corporations against the authorities in this battle for hegemony (Li, 2018).

Surely, existing literature on skateboarding in China provides compelling points for discussion and paints offers many insights into the skateboarding scene in the country. Li's (2018) research, in particular, covers a wide range of aspects related to the subculture. Yet, I believe it is fundamental to point out that both Sedo (2010) and Li (2018) focus their attention on some of China's biggest cities (Beijing, Guangzhou, Nanjing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Wuhan) where skate culture has been around for decades and is well developed, acquiring in many cases its own characteristics which make it unique. Thus, when discussing Chinese skateboarding, these two scholars generally refer to the cities where they conducted their research. Although similar in many aspects to the realities illustrated by them, skateboarding in Jinan also presents unique features that make it stand out from the declinations of this subculture that can be found in other cities.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

I conducted my research in Jinan, while attending Shandong University as an exchange student, as part of my study program. Jinan (济南) is a medium sized city and the capital of Shandong Province in Eastern China, located approximately 400 km south of Beijing. It has a population of over 4 million people, making it the second most populous city in the province, after Qingdao (Demographia, 2019). Jinan ranks as a “second-tier city”, as opposed to Qingdao that is a so-called “new first-tier city” (Huang, 2019). Although tier rankings are not part of the official terminology used by Chinese authorities, they have become a very popular way of painting a realistic image of the different levels of development of Chinese cities. Summers in Jinan are hot and humid while winters can be very cold and dry, with temperatures consistently dropping below zero. Moreover, due to its location in inland northern China, air pollution in Jinan is not uncommon, especially in the winter months, not making the city the ideal location for outdoor activities such as skateboarding.

The main reason behind my decision to study skateboarding in Jinan lies in my interest to discover the features that this subculture presents in a more peripheral and less developed city. Indeed, previous researchers of skateboarding in China directed their attention to first-tier and new first-tier cities. Of course, because skateboarding is an inherently foreign subculture and was introduced in China through a variety of foreign actors (Li, 2018; Sedo, 2010) its presence is more established in more developed cities with a higher expat population. However, studying skateboarding in a smaller city such as Jinan can provide an important insight on the characteristics of this cultural practice in more peripheral parts of China.

During one of my first visits in downtown Jinan in the spring of 2018 I stumbled upon what I would later find out to be the most popular of the very few skate spots in Jinan: in the square in front of 世贸国际广场 *Shimao guoji guangchang* (Shimao International Plaza), a shopping centre in a bustling commercial district. Local skateboarders often refer to the place as “Shimao Square” or simply “Shimao”, therefore in this thesis I use these two nomenclatures to indicate the most popular skate spot in town, where great part of my fieldwork took place. From my first ever encounter with skateboarding in Jinan, it was already quite clear to me that the skate community, although small, was vibrant and lively. Skateboarders were practicing and hanging out together under the warm early spring sun, listening to music on portable speakers, smoking cigarettes. I soon discovered the existence of a skate shop close-by, which is something not to be taken for granted in a mid-sized city such as Jinan. Coming across skateboarding in Jinan boosted my motivation and was enough for me to decide to direct my attention on the skateboarding subculture in the provincial capital, instead of choosing a different city.

In order to carry out my study I decided to use qualitative research methodologies as opposed to quantitative research, specifically semi-structured interviews as well as both participant and non-participant observation. Using these research techniques allowed me to personally get to know the subjects of my work and informally interact with them in their environment. Firstly, conducting personal interviews can be very helpful not only in order to study a certain phenomenon, but also to understand it from the perspective of the actors involved as well as knowing the meaning that is given to such phenomenon by them (Firestone, 1987). Analyzing how facts and experiences are expressed and addressed is just as important as the facts and experiences themselves. Even though the outline of the interviews was the same for all participants, this methodology allowed me to have some flexibility to investigate further when I felt that a specific topic could be more relevant than another. I decided from the beginning not to use questionnaires as I believe that this research method is not adequate for the kind of research that I am conducting. Questionnaires require a much larger sample of subjects compared to interviews, most probably including subjects from other parts of the country. I therefore preferred to use a more hands on approach and focus solely on the city of Jinan. Moreover, I believe that questionnaires could be seen as too formal by the subjects of my study and some of them could have refused to participate. On the other hand, conducting informal interviews allowed my subjects to feel at ease and steer the conversation towards the topics that they felt were relevant in their own experience, without creating such a formal research environment.

The interviews took place between the months of November and December 2018. In total, I carried out 14 semi-structured interviews, which length varied from less than 10 minutes to more than 30 minutes. All interviews were conducted in mandarin Chinese and, with permission from the participants, they were audiotaped for future reference. All fourteen subjects are skateboarders who live in Jinan. Their mean average age is 21 and ranges from 14 to 36 years of age, although most interviewees are under the age of 25. At times, I picked participants at random when they were taking a break from skateboarding or simply hanging out near a skate spot. Other times, snowballing method was used interviewing skaters that were introduced to me by other interviewees. All the skaters who have been interviewed were living in Jinan at the moment of the interview, most of them being Jinan natives.

The second methodology I used is observation, both participant and non-participant. Many contemporary scholars (e.g. Li, 2018; Thornton, 1995; Xiao, 2015) pursued research projects on subcultures and movements in which they felt they belonged. Conducting a study in a familiar field gives the researcher a hands-on approach allowing to relate with participants and understand insider perspective. The aforementioned contemporary scholars, who are subculture participants themselves, used their already existing knowledge of the field to seek a deep understanding of a certain subculture,

via participant observation (Haenfler, 2013). Even though I do not consider myself a committed skateboarder anymore, I am quite familiar with the values, language, style and subculture shared by skateboarders in the West, in particular Italy, the country where I grew up and spent most of my life and the USA, the place of birth of skateboarding and the home of most skate companies and media. In fact, I have always liked keeping informed about the skateboarding world by reading online articles by popular skateboarding magazines, watching skateboard videos and documentaries and following skateboarders on social media even after I stopped skateboarding myself. I believe that my knowledge of skateboarding subculture gave me an advantage in approaching the subjects of my research and connecting with them. I did not introduce myself as a skateboarder, but as a scholar of their subculture. However, when asked if I wanted to skate with them, I would agree, and my very rusty skills were apparently enough for me to gain the confidence of some of them. Furthermore, some of them would engage in conversations with me as they were interested in my research and others, because I was a foreigner, which is not very common sight in Jinan. In total, I spent about 20 hours doing participant observation at Shimao, 惠滑板店 *Hui huaban dian* (Hui skate shop) as well as other locations such as restaurants and the main campus of Shandong University where a few skateboarders gather occasionally. During these times I would have casual, off the record conversations with other skaters. Moreover, I took note on my mobile phone of episodes or aspects that I found striking.

In November 2018 I started visiting Shimao Square for research purposes. At first, I limited myself to observations from a distance, in order to get acquainted with the environment and visited mostly on weekends for about half an hour to an hour each time. I would stand back and observe the activity in the busy square. Skateboarders, BMX riders and longboarders were regularly gathering in front of the many shops, from late morning to late evening, regardless of the weather. After a few weeks I decided to start carrying informal semi-structured interviews, starting at Hui skate shop. Zhao, the owner, was very welcoming and open to help me with my project and immediately accepted to take part in the project. During the period of my research I spent quite some time with Zhao and a few of his close skateboarding friends, engaging in friendly conversations while having dinner together or simply spending time at the skate shop. Zhao was fundamental in the success of my research as he acted as a key informant, opening the doors of his world to me. In fact, it is my impression that Zhao was more or less known by the vast majority of the skaters in Jinan, surely thanks to his important role in the community as the owner of the only skate shop in town. Although during the time of my research he never skateboarded due to the cold winter weather, he was respected by many skaters that warmly greeted him whenever he visited Shimao Square. I also managed to contact Huang, the president of the Shandong University Skate Club and a skater himself. However,

I was only able to exchange a few words with him on WeChat since the Skate Club, which is located in a smaller campus on the northern side of town, was not active during the winter.

After the field research period was completed, I gathered all the data collected through interviews and observation and organized them. Specifically, I listened to the recorded interviews several times and took note of all the aspects that I deemed interesting and relevant. I color coded the different topics discussed by the participants in order to facilitate the analysis of the data and to compare the different views of the interviewees on the same issues including topics of authenticity, resistance, self-identification and government intervention. Finally, as some participants did not feel comfortable disclosing their real names, randomly generated names were assigned to each interviewee.

## **4. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

### **4.1. Skaters in Jinan**

The exact number of skateboarders in Jinan is unknown to me due to the size of the city and the fact that there are more than a group of skateboarders other than the one I focused on. However, after spending about two months visiting locations popular with skateboarders, as well as taking note of skaters in other areas of the city such as university campuses and public parks, I counted approximately 30 different participants. The majority of the skaters in Jinan are part of one group and generally gather in Shimao Square. This group, which I believe is representative of the whole skateboarding scene in Jinan, is the subject of this thesis. One other, smaller group exists as well, in the form of a skate club at Shandong university, however I did not have the opportunity to get to know its members. Occasional presence of skateboarders was recorded in other parts of the city, mostly in the form of university students practicing in campuses, but these encounters were nowhere near the group in Shimao Square both in numbers and frequency of participation. All skateboarders are male, and generally in their twenties, however I met also teenage skaters as well as skateboarders in their thirties. The level of skateboarding experience also varies amongst participants, the less experienced ones having taken up skateboarding only a few months before the interviews were conducted, and others had up to 7 years of experience. As explained to me by a few interviewees, the majority of skaters in Jinan is made up of high school and university students, but there are exceptions. Indeed, at least four of them are not students: out of the skateboarders that took part in the interviews, two work at Hui skate shop and two are employed in companies not related to skateboarding.

### **4.2. Hui skate shop**

The skateboarding scene in Jinan revolves around a few locations (or spots, as skateboarders like to call them) as well as a skate shop. Skate shops are a fundamental part of skateboarding subculture around the world. In Chinese skate culture too, skate shops and local skate companies are of great importance and provide support to the local community. These activities “represent the local skateboarding culture better than almost any other form of business representations” (Li, 2018, p. 158). Firstly, this is where many skateboarders purchase their equipment as well as skate shoes and clothes. Moreover, skate shops act as physical gathering places, where skateboarders meet and often spend time together in a friendly environment.

Hui is the go-to skate shop for skaters in Jinan and the only ‘real’ skate shop in town. In fact, other so-called skate shops in Jinan actually sell longboarding equipment, as well as other extreme sport gear. Hui is located in an area of the city greatly frequented by local youth, in line with Li’s

(2018) observations on other skate shops in China. The shop can be found in downtown Jinan, in a bustling commercial and business district, albeit slightly hidden on the ground floor of a housing complex. Moreover, it is only a couple of minutes walking from Shimao Square, Jinan's skate hotspot.

Zhao opened Hui a few years back and runs the shop helped by Han, his friend and fellow skateboarder. According to Zhao, the skate shop's clientele is composed in almost its entirety by active participants in the skate subculture. However, he explained to me that most of the shop's revenue does not come from physical customers, but rather from online sales. The shop's WeChat profile is updated whenever new products are in stock orders are taken directly through the social media page. By adopting this business method, Zhao manages to keep rent low by not needing to locate the shop in a more visible area. Indeed, high rent costs are one of the reasons a number of early skate shops in China went out of business (Li, 2018). Hui consists of a very small main space, which is filled with equipment and clothes for sale, as long as a few posters picturing famous skateboarders performing tricks. Behind a door another small room can be found, acting as office, warehouse as well as hangout place for employees and friends. Although rather small, I found the space to be organized with the intent of being welcoming to visitors, with a few chairs and a sofa. This is where Zhao the owner and Han the employee spend their time when they are working at the shop.

### **4.3. Skate spots**

When it comes to practicing their skills and hanging out, skateboarders around the world usually can choose between two main categories: there are "spots" and "parks". "Spots" are areas which are not designed for skateboarding but are used by skaters regardless and are generally located on public property. The term "park" on the other hand, refers to skateparks, indoor and outdoor public or private areas built specifically for skateboarding (Slee, 2011). Different kinds of skating locations call for different skateboarding styles, namely "street skating" or "park skating". In Jinan however, there are currently no skateparks, and most skaters have no choice but to skate on public property.

Although Jinan offers a wide variety of public squares and parks, there appear to be only a handful of skate spots in the city, the most popular one being Shimao. Shimao is the home for groups of skateboarders, as well as BMX riders and longboarders. These three groups however do not usually mix and hang out in different areas of the square, an aspect that I further discuss later. In case of heavy rain or snowfall, skaters occasionally choose to practice in an underground car park not far from Shimao.

A number of skateboarders can be found at Shimao on weekdays, especially in the afternoon, however it is during the weekend that most of them gather in the square until late at night, regardless of the weather. During the period of my research the weather was often very cold, with temperatures



consistently dropping several degrees below the zero. However, most skateboarders did not seem bothered by that and kept practicing and having fun. I particularly remember one afternoon in December, when I visited the square to conduct interviews, I was shivering so much that I could hardly speak, and the phone that I was using to record, shut down mid-interview due to the freezing temperature. Many of the interviewees, when asked whether the adverse weather would impact their skateboarding replied that they did not care too much, as skateboarding is their life and they enjoy it regardless of the cold. I believe this aspect to be a truly remarkable sign of the commitment that many skaters in Jinan have towards their passion.

## **5. COMMON ASPECTS OF SKATEBOARDING IN JINAN**

The following chapter analyses those practices and values that the Jinan skate scene shares with other subcultures and skateboarding communities around the world. The presence of similar features that connect skateboarding in Jinan to the wider world of skateboarding can be linked to the concept of ‘mimetic isomorphism’ presented by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). This phenomenon, that was initially linked to commercial organizations, occurs when an organization (in this case the Jinan skateboarding community) mimics the practices of another organization that is perceived as more successful (skateboarding in the West). Indeed, most skateboarders in Jinan said to regularly consume digital media, keeping up with the international world of skateboarding through online magazines, videos and social media. Thanks to the internet, participants in Jinan are exposed to global skateboarding culture and have a clear idea of what foreign declinations of skateboarding represent in their eyes. Seeing those scenes as an example to follow, in contrast to their much newer and less developed reality, they unconsciously try to emulate those practices that they believe make a scene authentic and successful, thus resulting in the adoption of similar values and beliefs.

### **5.1. Coolness and resistance**

One relevant aspect of skateboarding in Jinan is the perception that participants have of themselves and of the subculture they love. My research shows that a great number of skaters in the city considers their status of skateboarders as an important element of the image they have of themselves, both as individuals and as a group. They strongly emphasize the positive changes that skateboarding has brought to their lives, with regards to their external appearance, self-confidence and personality. Moreover, their identity is strongly linked to the role that skateboarding plays in making them feel unique, thus different from the mainstream, as well as from other alternative movements.

Almost all interviewees mentioned what I call the ‘cool factor’. Around the world skateboarding is indeed seen as a cool activity by many, regardless of their affiliation with the subculture. The media and consumer industries regularly use alternative sports such as skateboarding to sell their products (Wheaton & Beal, 2003). From advertisements to television and cinema, skateboarding is often represented as cool and edgy, and the youth are often exposed and attracted by its image, including those in Jinan. Moreover, anyone with a mobile phone and an internet connection can have access to endless archives of skateboarding media. When asked what led them to begin skateboarding most interviewees indicated wanting to emulate skaters they saw online as the primary

reason. Moreover, at least half of them used the word ‘cool’ to describe the attraction of skateboarding, like in the following example:

*“[I started skateboarding] because I thought skateboarding was really cool, really neat... and I also wanted to be so cool, so handsome, so I started skating.”*

Yang, 16 years old, high school student

Although phrasing their opinions differently, other interviewees also mentioned the attractive image of skateboarding as the main reason behind their choice to approach it. In fact, almost all of them decided to approach skateboarding after having seen other skaters practicing on the street, or in videos and films. From the interviews it emerges that the concept of coolness takes many forms in the eyes of participants, influencing the way they see themselves. Many skaters in Jinan agree that skateboarding has radically changed their lives in a positive way. Some of them described their former selves as “losers”, “ugly” and with “few friends”. Skateboarding boosted their self-confidence, as well as their perceived attractiveness in their own eyes. For many skaters in Jinan in fact, skateboarding does not only imply the physical act of riding a board but translates into a whole lifestyle.

*“I think...I’ve been skating for 4 years, right? I believe that if 4 years ago I didn’t begin skating I wouldn’t be like I am today, I would be some ugly loser, something like that. Not like I am today. [...] It [skateboarding] influenced my appearance and my mentality. I would never think about quitting skateboarding.”*

Liu, 20 years old, university student

*“To me skateboarding means...skateboarding changed me a lot, it changed my lifestyle, it changed my life, yeah. A lot of things [in my life] are because of skateboarding.”*

Zhao, 33 years old, skate shop owner

*“Skateboarding means life. My whole life. If I didn’t skate I’d surely have to work somewhere else and I wouldn’t have a passion. I wouldn’t be like this if I didn’t skate. 90% of my life is skateboarding.”*

Han, 26 years old, skate shop employee

This research shows that skateboarders in Jinan, in line with those in other parts of the world present different levels of resistance: towards mainstream society, mainstream sports and other alternative cultures. Participants discussed their status of skateboarders as contrasting with mainstream values and practices, as already previously observed by subculture scholars (e.g. Becker, 1963; Haenfler, 2013; Hebdige, 1979; Williams, 2011). When asked what they intended by mainstream, most participants mentioned playing videogames, going shopping, excessive use of social media and binge-watching online tv shows as mainstream behaviors, often mentioning classmates and other age-peers as examples. Skateboarders in Jinan seem to agree that although they believe standing out from mainstream culture is something to be proud of, it is not through their physical appearance that they strive to do so. For the majority of them, what makes them different is the simple fact that they skate; by doing something different, rather than looking different, they want to stand out from the crowd. Since skateboard clothing brands are rather popular with non-skaters as well now, for skaters in Jinan the clearest form of resistance comes from skateboarding itself.

*“Yeah, [skateboarding] changed my life, because before I started skating, I just used to go to internet cafes to play videogames and go to school every day, that’s it...I didn’t know what to do, only that.”*

Hu, 20 years old, high school student

Many skaters around the globe also strongly oppose the inclusion of skateboarding in the wider category of mainstream sports (Beal, 1995, 1996; Bradley, 2010; Dupont, 2014; Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie, 2005; Slee, 2011; Snyder, 2012). Beal’s (1995, 1996) studies show how skateboarders created an “alternative masculinity”, based on different values than those that are the norm in most mainstream sports. Generally speaking, competition in skateboarding is disregarded and skaters help each other learning new tricks and cheer when others succeed, an attitude that is carried out even during organized competitions. In recent years a number of major corporations both and professional skaters in the USA and Europe have promoted introduced arena-style skateboarding contests in the fashion of mainstream sports, thus intensifying conflicts within the skate community regarding the meaning of authenticity. However, the core values that make skateboarding different from mainstream sports are still supported by great part of the global skate community at the local level (Dupont, 2014).

In Jinan, I observed similar situations. Among the interviewees, only a few had participated in official competitions, and out of them, almost all expressed little interest in winning and said that the reason they took part in such events was to have fun and spend time with their skate mates.

*“I took part in competitions before, but I don’t really want to anymore. Because I don’t skate to compete, I skate to have fun and to do the tricks that I want.”*

Hu, 20 years old, high school student

During my observations at Shimao, I witnessed countless acts of camaraderie among skaters, helping each other out mastering new skills, filming videos and generally supporting each other in a harmonious environment. More aspects that make skateboarding different from other sports are the freedom and the general lack of formality and organization that are typical of many mainstream sports. Skateboarding allows anyone who practices it to be expressive in their own way. There are no rules, participants constantly invent new tricks and evolve their style drawing upon the experience of previous generations of skaters. In line with their North American counterparts, skaters in Jinan agree on the fact that the subcultural side of skateboarding is far more relevant than its athletic forms. Indeed, some of the skaters I interviewed admitted to having approached skateboarding while looking to take up a sport but claimed to have quickly been captivated by “something that goes beyond just a sport” and became a lifestyle for them.

Finally, a third kind of resistance was observed, towards other alternative groups. In Shimao, apart from skateboarders, groups of longboarders and BMX riders can be found regularly. However, the skateboarders do not have any form of interaction with the longboarders. I have personally heard a number of skateboarders referring them as ‘posers’ and making fun of them, not taking longboarding as seriously. Interaction with the BMX group is more frequent, with participants from the two groups being friends. However, the skateboarders tend to isolate themselves and look down on the other groups, often commenting negatively. For instance, the first time I met Zhao and Liu they promptly asked me if I liked longboarding and proudly stated that they do not like it saying skateboarding is “way cooler”. In skate culture it is quite common for participants to look down on other action sports users such as rollerbladers and BMX riders (Nolan, 2003), but mostly longboard and scooter riders. Skateboarders, in fact, often do not consider longboarders to be part of an authentic subculture and do not want to associate with longboarding, believing that riding a longboard does not require any skill and often mocking them.

## 5.2. Sense of community

When discussing skateboarding, the sense of community that many skaters associate with it cannot be overlooked. Indeed, the fact that skateboarding in Jinan is very contained, with very little choice when it comes to skate shops and skate spots, has its advantages. The physical tightness of the community, with all main skate hotspots within a kilometer radius and the amount of participants still quite far from triple figure numbers, brings skaters together. Members of the community hang out in the same places and interact with each other on a regular basis, getting to know each other quite well with time. A number of participants affirmed to have made a great number of new friends through skateboarding, building relationships that with them outside of the skate spots. None of the skaters I interviewed is a professional, and they all have other engagements in life, whether it is studying or working. However, most of them said to be spending most of their free time skateboarding and hanging out with skate mates, frequenting the same restaurants, bars and clubs in their free time.

*Yesterday I was hanging out at Shimao doing some interviews. Liu was skating with some friends and came to sit next to me on the bench. He asked me if I had any plans for the evening and invited me to join him and a bunch of other skaters drinking at a bar, he said they often go there after skating sessions.*

Fieldnote, December 2018

*“If I’m not skateboarding I’d probably hang out with my skate mates anyway...we go out drinking or eating somewhere doing these kinds of stuff that we like.”*

Hu, 20 years old, high school student

This sense of community is quite common in skateboarding subculture, and the Jinan scene appears to be quite close-knit and harmonious. Participants share the same spaces and help each other filming videos or learning new tricks. In addition, I have never observed any sort of verbal or physical conflict among the participants. From my interviews and chats with local skateboarders it emerged that participants are aware of the relatively small size of the skate scene in Jinan when compared with those in bigger cities they look up to, such as Beijing, Shanghai or Shenzhen. As I will further discuss later, skateboarders in Jinan wish for a growth in the size of their community and for an increase of awareness on skateboarding by the general public and government help to fund infrastructure and associations in order to increase the popularity of skateboarding not only in Jinan, but in the whole

country. Indeed, in order to achieve such aims, one important step is to be acceptive of newcomers creating an open and approachable community that draws in those who are interested in getting into skateboarding.

Apart from being the norm in skateboarding subculture (Slee, 2011), this sense of community features in other subcultures as well, where participants relate to each other by sharing similar values, practices and passions, thus recognizing the differences between them and other groups, as well as creating tight bonds with their peers.

One strong physical manifestation of the sense of community in Jinan skateboarding culture can be found in the role played by the local skate shop. As mentioned in the previous chapter, skate shops often serve a double purpose: that of commercial activity and that of gathering place for members of the skate community. Hui is an important part of the skateboarding movement in Jinan acting as a familiar place for skaters to spend time together and fraternize. Although I frequently stopped by the shop during my research, I noticed that the number of skaters visiting the shop with the sole purpose of passing time with other skaters was rather high.

*When I arrived at the skate shop the front door was closed, I knocked while opening it and heard Zhao shout to come in. I had never met him before, but he welcomed me with a smile and pointed at a chair in the back room inviting me to sit down. I was surprised by how easy-going Zhao was. I sat down and while I explained the purpose of my visit they [Zhao and Liu] offered me some kind of dried fruit I had never seen before, you had to keep it in your mouth like a snus [bag of chewing tobacco] and it had the same energizing effect. I could feel the communal atmosphere typical of a skate shop.*

Fieldnote, November 2018

Another time, I visited the shop looking for the owner, but instead I found half a dozen skateboarders hanging out inside, none of whom was employed at the shop and I was told that they did not know what time Zhao would be back. Indeed, this aspect of skate shops is rather peculiar and is a strong indicator of the tight bond and trust that ties participants in skate scenes around the world, as argued by Dupont (2014). For instance, in the 2018 film *Mid 90s* directed by Jonah Hill and following the lives of a group of skaters in the Los Angeles of the 1990s, the main protagonists can be often seen hanging out in the skate shop drinking, smoking and partying. However, even without bringing up American fiction cinema, such peculiarities of skate shops were noticed by Li (2018) in other parts of China, for example in his description of a skate shop in Beijing, a place that I myself visited in 2015 while living in the Chinese capital.

### 5.3. Internal hierarchy

Although the atmosphere in the Jinan skate scene is rather friendly and the majority of skaters are keen to help and support each other having built a small and close-knit community, my research shows a case of hierarchical internal subdivision based on skateboarding skills and commitment. In general, more seasoned skaters are well regarded by less experienced members of the community, due to their competence and are often seen as an example to follow. Capable skaters have been indicated by novice participants as those setting the benchmark for the level of the skateboarding scene in Jinan. At the same time, the attitude of respected skaters towards less skilled members of the community varies from one person to another. For instance, Zhao, who is one of the oldest skateboarders in Jinan and is fully involved in the community by running the skate shop, has always shown great support for all participants, often stopping to chat with skaters regardless of their skill level or age. On the other hand, attitudes of superiority have been observed at times. In more than one occasion, I have been asked by a few seasoned skaters why I was interviewing participants with less experience, as if they were not worthy to be considered for my research project. Clearly, different skill levels and commitment seem to be the most important factor in determining the internal status of a skateboarder.

*Last Saturday, after I interviewed him, Liu took me to Shimao to meet some skaters to talk to. When we arrived at the square, I pointed at some kids with skateboards sitting on a bench taking a break and suggested I could start with them. He scoffed and said that they were new and that they were not real skaters. I followed his advice at first, but later I interviewed them anyway. They were Xu and Chen.*

Fieldnote, November 2018

The subject of hierarchies within the subculture of skateboarding is not new and has previously been tackled by scholars (Dupont, 2014; Slee, 2011). Dupont's (2014) study shows how subcultural capital, social capital and commitment, along with race, gender and social class, all play a role in the creation of hierarchies within skateboarding, from the most respected 'core skateboarders' all the way down to outsiders. A similar perspective is provided by Slee (2011), who divides participants into four categories ranging from 'posers', who are not considered real skaters, to 'lifers', who occupy the top step of the pyramid and indicate those who have been involved in skateboarding for the longest time and are most committed to the subculture. Chinese skateboarding is also familiar with this phenomenon. Li (2018) shows how older skaters occupy a position of relevance in the skate



community by playing key roles such as team manager, company owner and being ‘big brothers’ for younger generations of Chinese skaters.

Indeed, hierarchical subdivision amongst members of a same cultural group is not new to subculture academics. For instance, in the world of punk those who were most committed to the scene were considered ‘authentic’, as opposed to those who were not as committed and were considered “fake” punks (Fox in Dupont, 2014, p. 558). Xiao’s (2015) research on Chinese punks also shows evidence of inner circles within the bigger punk scene in some Chinese cities. Moreover, in her study on club music in the UK, Thornton (1995) articulated Bordieu’s concept of ‘subcultural capital’, which is used by subculturalists to distinguish themselves both from outsiders and from members of the same group. In the case of Jinan, subcultural capital is represented by skills, commitment to the subculture and experience. Finally, because of the very nature of subcultural hierarchy in skateboarding, in Jinan, as well as in other skate communities around the world, participants have the opportunity of climbing the subcultural ladder, by gaining subcultural capital with time, practice and commitment.

#### **5.4. Male domination**

The world of skateboarding presents a noticeable gap between male and female participation, as males constitute the majority of participants (Beal, 1995, 1996; Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie, 2005; Slee, 2011). Indeed, Jinan is not an exception when it comes to this aspect of skateboarding. In fact, as mentioned in the previous chapter of this thesis, not one single female skateboarder has been encountered during the field research for this thesis. Although I observed female presence in Shimao, it was simply consisting of friends or girlfriends of male skaters and none of them actively participated in skateboarding. In contrast, the group of longboard riders at Shimao included a number of female participants. When confronted with my observations regarding the lack of girl skaters most interviewees seemed not to have an opinion on the matter or admitted to not having noticed this aspect altogether, as in the following instance:

*The other day Liu and he showed me a picture of his girlfriend. I asked him if she also liked skateboarding, but he shook his head and said that girls do not skate, they just hang out at Shimao to watch and chat. So, I asked him what he thought about the fact that the number of female skateboarders is much smaller than male skateboarders. He simply replied that he did not know and had never thought about that prior to my question.*

Fieldnote, December 2018

Other participants expressed similar opinions: in no way they suggested to be against females skateboarding, however they seemed to not be bothered by this fact and simply accept it as it is. Similar opinions of this issue were presented by participants in Beal's (1996) study, where male participants' explanations for this gender gap "ranged from describing 'natural' differences to social preferences of males and females (Beal, 1996, p. 213). At the same time, the issue of male domination can be directly linked to the aspect of resistance to mainstream sports discussed above. Although the number of male and female skateboarders in Jinan and other regions of the world alike is very unbalanced, male skaters often attain to values such as freedom, self-expression, de-emphasizing of competitiveness and cooperation that rather differ from those shared by athletes of mainstream disciplines.

In conclusion, my observations demonstrate that the Jinan skate scene does not differ from other skateboard scenes around the planet in terms of gender diversity. An overwhelming male presence in skateboarding culture is widespread across different skate communities and male participants often lack awareness on the matter. However, as previously addressed (Beal, 1995, 1996; Bradley, 2010) male participants create an "alternative masculinity", based on values that go hand in hand with the idea of skateboarding as an alternative to mainstream sports.

## **6. PECULIAR ASPECTS OF SKATEBOARDING IN JINAN**

In this chapter I present the unique characteristics that make skateboarding in Jinan different from skate scenes featured in other studies. Social customs, self-perception and comparison with other scenes are all factors that have a strong influence on the members of the community, leading them to share certain values and behaviors that are specific and have not been observed before.

### **6.1. Embracing the sports side of skateboarding and governmental incorporation**

When discussing skateboarding in China, two themes, that might seem unrelated at first, appear to be actually tightly intertwined: sport and governmental incorporation. The strong desire for skaters in Jinan to see both the local and national skate scene grow in numbers and popularity has led them to openly support the incorporation of skateboarding actuated by Chinese government agencies. On the local level, interviewees expressed their desire for the city government to build skateparks, open skateboarding schools and organize events to support the community and to help spreading skateboarding culture to the public; on the national level they agree with policies aimed at promoting the athletic features of skateboarding, although still highlighting the difference between skateboarding and mainstream sports. This open approach is peculiar to say the least as governmental incorporation of skateboarding both on the local and national level has been heavily criticized by a great number of skaters around the country (Li, 2018; Sedo, 2010). Although recent years have seen an improvement in the relationship between CESA and the Chinese skateboarding community (Li, 2018), research shows that many participants still harbor negative sentiments towards governmental intervention. The involvement of CESA in the skateboarding scene has often met the skepticism of Chinese skaters and government backed institutions never seemed able to connect with the community. In fact, CESA has promoted the athletic side of skateboarding, while purposely neglecting its subcultural features fearing that it could result in the rise of anti-socialist ideologies among the youth (Li, 2018). At the same time, the introduction of skateboarding in the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games represents an opportunity for China to make a name for the country in a competitive discipline. With this aim in mind, skateboarding has recently been taken quite seriously by Chinese authorities. Provincial skateboarding teams and skate camps have been established with the aim of training skateboarders to create a competitive national team. These initiatives, schools and skate camps have received criticism by the skate community for their lack of interest towards already accomplished and committed skateboarders. According to some participants both to Li's (2018) study and mine, skate schools chose their students based on their proficiency in martial arts and gymnastics, rather than skateboarding. In one propaganda-oozing video that can be found online young

skateboarders wearing tracksuits bearing the Chinese flag can be seen attending rigorous group training with instructors as would athletes of any mainstream athletic discipline. In the video description section, the original poster, a Chinese skater who is clearly not involved in its creation, but rather simply reposted it on Youtube writes: “China's Olympic Skateboarding training team is ridiculous!!! Kids from Shaolin temples were selected according to the results from push-ups and running” (Shao, 2017). Many critical comments can be also found in the comment section of the video.

Compared to the skate scenes analysed in Li's (2018) and Sedo's (2010) researches, skateboarding in Jinan is still in its infancy; according to one of the more seasoned skateboarders that I talked to (33-year-old Zhao) the number of participants in Jinan was much smaller when he first got into skateboarding less than a decade before. Skateboarders in Jinan are aware of this gap and often made comparisons with foreign countries, (the US and Europe in particular), mentioning skate scenes overseas as benchmarks to follow. I argue this is the main reason behind their open support of governmental intervention. In contrast with the more widespread view shared by the majority of skaters, in China and not only, that condemn excessive government intervention and see sporting events such as the Olympics as a danger to the subculture, skaters in Jinan embrace these aspects, both on the local and the national context, believing they are the fastest way for their community to grow and for skateboarding to reach the mainstream audience in the country.

A number of interviewees expressed dissatisfaction regarding the present status of skateboarding, both on the local and national level, stating that the general skill level of Chinese skaters in China not comparable with that of professional skaters abroad. Unsurprisingly, most of them indicated foreign professional skateboarders as their favourites. What particularly strikes me is the fact that a number of participants see the Olympics as a great opportunity for the future of Chinese skateboarding. Most participants support policies of nationalization of skateboarding, believing it is the right path to follow for their culture to gain popularity. During my conversation with various participants, the Shandong Province skateboarding team came up frequently. The establishment of provincial skate teams was indicated as a great initiative to promote skateboarding and to nurture a new generation of skaters to compete in international contests, such as the Olympics.

*“The atmosphere [of the skate scene in Jinan] is good, but there are few skilled skaters. [...] The Chinese scene... it is better, there definitely are more established skaters. But you know, from this year... there are the Olympics, no? This would be an opportunity to publicize skateboarding in China. There are many skaters, but the level is still lower compared to places such as Europe, the USA and Japan.”*

Zhou, 36 years old, employee in a company

Opinions on the local skate scene were also critical albeit still optimistic. Skateboarders expressed their desire to see skateboarding in Jinan reach the level of bigger Chinese cities. Again, government intervention has been indicated as an important form of help for the increase in the popularity of skateboarding in the local context. In particular, skaters manifested their desire for the local municipality to build a skatepark in the inner city. As mentioned before, a skatepark existed in the past, but although it was very well built and provided many different surfaces for practicing, it was closed down due to the lack of visitors, as it was located in a remote area outside of town.

*“In the past there was a very good [skatepark] in Jinan, but there were not enough people going so it closed down. [...] So now Shimao could be considered kind of a skatepark. That skatepark from before was free, and really, really cool. [...] I hope local governments would open at least one skatepark in every city, because many cities do not have one.”*

Han, 26 years old, skate shop employee

The circumstances regarding the former skatepark are comparable to other cases mentioned by Li (2018). His study in fact showed how in both Beijing and Shanghai skateboarding had been implemented in local government planning through the edification of skateparks in rural districts as an attempt to promote such areas, with questionable results. However, the case of Jinan is different in that the skate community's only dissatisfaction with the skatepark was its remote location. On the other hand, the Beijing International Fashion Sports Park in the capital and the SMP Skatepark in Shanghai had been criticized by local skaters for the lack of building quality, as they were built by putting the developers' priorities in front of the those of the skaters (Li, 2018).

*“The skate scene in Jinan I think it's still... it's still not so good, because now there aren't many places to skate... it's hard to skate in all the public squares because you bump into people. I hope that more skateparks will be opened. [...] The Chinese skate scene is better, there are competitions and there are foreign [skaters] and it's possible to connect. Skateboarding in Jinan is not representative of skateboarding in China... in Jinan there are only two skate shops, they are not many. [...] I hope skateboarding will become a common sport, like basketball... like there are many basketball courts I hope there will be more and more skateparks and skate shops and that people who skate will be more and more.”*

Deng, 15 years old, high school student

One of the reasons why Chinese skaters in other scenes have had difficulty accepting the involvement of agencies in their subculture lies behind the process of nationalization actuated by CESA in recent years. A number of skateboarders recollect negative experiences related to their participation to national and international contests, where they were enrolled in the national skateboarding team without their knowledge being forced to compete under the Chinese flag, feeling their freedom being taken away by these restrictions (Li, 2018). Moreover, in order to make Chinese skateboarding competitive at the international level, institutions have started sponsoring skateboarding schools that train athletes with the aim of taking part in big competitions such as the Olympics. This aspect has been described as a particularly hard pill to swallow by a number of participants in Li's (2018) research, as training and excessive control as going against all basic principles of skateboarding. Indeed, because many of the skateboarders in Jinan have not been involved in the subculture for too long, they do not have the experience shared by members of more well-established skate scenes throughout the country. On the one hand, they are aware of the efforts needed to create a bigger community, on the other hand, they do not have any personal reason to disagree with the push for nationalization of the sport of skateboarding, not having had negative experiences themselves. Thus, they embrace the actions taken by agencies believing they are the right move for the future of skateboarding in their country.

In conclusion, I argue that the case of Jinan is quite unique. Participants seem to have radically different opinions from those in other parts of the country. Indeed, both the fact that the skateboarding scene in the capital of Shandong is still rather young and that its members are hungry to see the local and national communities grow leads to an openness to external help. In order to do so they are willing to compromise their perception of skateboarding, embracing both its subcultural and athletic aspect, albeit still believing in the values that makes their subculture different from other sports. At the same time, although having proved to be very passionate about their subculture, they do not give too much importance to the never-ending debate between subculture and sport. Whatever is the path that leads to the prosperity of skateboarding in Jinan and in China, they seem on board with it, at least for now.

## **6.2. School first, skateboarding second**

During my field study I observed that skaters in Jinan are very committed to what they love. Regardless of the freezing winter temperatures, cold wind and icy slippery pavement, it was rare not to hear the loud popping sound of the wooden boards against the marble floor of Shimao square, almost any time of day, until late at night. However, I also discovered that, the skaters that are still students (10 out of 14 interviewees) give great importance to their academic commitments, putting

them in front of their love for skateboarding, even though it represents their greatest passion. Indeed, only one of them (14-year-old Xu) openly expressed his disdain for school. In this section I present the reasons behind their choice to prioritize their education as opposed to skateboarding. Because this topic mostly concerns those skaters that are still in school or at university, my considerations in this section will refer only to them, not including those who are not students.

When participants were asked about the amount of time that they spend skateboarding, the majority of their responses could be summarized in five words: whenever they are not studying. The middle and high school students all affirmed that scholastic commitments occupy most part of their days and that they would practice skateboarding mostly during weekends, holidays and, in the case of weekdays, only after they completed their homework. Similar are the circumstances of university students who live on campus both in Jinan or in other cities as they admitted leaving their skateboard at home and only in the weekend during the school semester. Liu, for instance (20 years old), studies engineering in a high-ranking university in Jinan and can hardly find the time on weekend evenings to go to Shimao and land some tricks. I remember him rejecting many of my proposals to meet as he was busy preparing university exams. And there is Hu, who used to be part of the national skateboarding team. He is a high school student whose family is originally from Beijing but moved to Jinan for him to study in a top school. I remember that I had to be annoyingly insistent in order to convince him to follow me at the skate shop to conduct an interview as he was rushing home to study for the Gaokao, an exam that Chinese students take at the end of high school, the result of which has a very big impact on one's chance to enroll into a prestigious university. These instances are indeed many, and they all lead to one conclusion: education comes first.

In China, good academic performance is seen as the right path to follow in order to create a bright future for oneself; as a matter of fact, Chinese parents believe that by studying and achieving high degrees the youth can find a well-paying job and occupy a prestigious role in society (Fong, 2004; Kipnis, 2011). Moreover, Kipnis' (2011) study that was conducted in Zouping County, Shandong Province, shows that such strong educational desire reaches particularly high levels in the whole province as well as a number of other areas of the country (Kipnis, 2011). This aspect of Chinese society certainly influences the participants' approach to skateboarding and seems to be in contrast with findings presented by previous research on skateboarding (Bradley, 2010) that show skateboarders to have in average lower academic aspirations than their counterparts and are more likely to break school rules.

Many of the skaters that I interviewed had been at point criticized by their parents and relatives because of their choice to skateboard. Parents were opposing them for a number of reasons, the two

common ones being fear that skateboarding would lead to a decrease in academic performance and fear of injuries.

*“I’ve received a lot [of criticism], for example when I first started skateboarding my parents were really against it and wanted to burn my board.”*

Xu, 14 years old, middle school student

Indeed, it is important to point out that out of the skaters interviewed, Xu was the only one to express dissatisfaction with this situation, struggling to accept it. He continued:

*“[...] In the past I had a very good relationship with my parents and teachers, but now not so much anymore... I don’t really like to only study, I also want to do what I like.”*

Xu, 14 years old, middle school student

When asked about their relationship with authority (as in parents, teachers, superiors and public officials) the vast majority of skaters in Jinan responded to never have had any significant contrast with these subjects. Some of the younger participants also told me that they managed to slowly change their parents’ opinion about them skateboarding by demonstrating to them that school is their priority and that skateboarding does not get in the way of their commitments.

In conclusion, the importance given to academic performance by skaters in Jinan is the consequence of three factors. The first can be found in contemporary Chinese society where one’s future is believed to be directly linked to one’s proficiency in school. The higher the results, the higher the chance to build a respectable career, obtaining power and prestige in society. The second reason is personal: as most of the skaters I interviewed still depend from their families, performing well in school for building a bright future is as important as it is for leveraging their parents into allowing them to skate. Finally, although all interviewees expressed a strong desire to keep skateboarding for as long as they can, the majority of them said to not be interested in becoming professional skaters. Again, as argued in the previous section on governmental intervention, many skaters in Jinan appear to take skateboarding with ease. With this I am not implying in any way that participants do not care about skateboarding nor that they do not take it seriously. However, participants in my research understand the importance of academic performance and put their education before their passion.



## 7. CONCLUSION

This thesis consists in an ethnographic research that aims at discovering the characteristics that the subculture of skateboarding presents in the city of Jinan, an area of China where no previous research on this topic was conducted. Among the features of skateboarding in Jinan, I have individuated both aspects that are common to other subcultures and skate scenes, and peculiarities that make the case I analyzed unique, result of the surrounding environment as well as beliefs shared by participants.

I argue that the reasons for such similarities shared with other skate scenes around the world can be linked to the concept of “mimetic isomorphism” as created by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). By viewing the status of skateboarding abroad as the goal to reach, skaters in Jinan imitate the practices of skaters in other parts of the world.

Indeed, skateboarding plays a very important role in shaping the identities of participants in my research. In their eyes skateboarding is cool, thus being skateboarders makes them cool as a consequence. Being cool is also strictly tied to being different. Many interviewees shared their stories of how, in their eyes, skateboarding transformed their identity from mainstream, videogame-playing, television-watching anti socials, to giving them the opportunity to be part of something that is much more than a hobby. They discussed their former ‘mainstream’ selves and Skateboarders in Jinan are in fact no different from members of a number of subcultures around the world for wanting to distinguish themselves from mainstream society (Becker, 1963; Haenfler, 2013; Hebdige, 1979; Williams, 2011), from mainstream sports (Beal, 1995, 1996; Bradley, 2010; Dupont, 2014; Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie, 2005; Slee, 2011; Snyder, 2012) as well as other alternative sports (Nolan, 2003), namely the group of BMX riders and longboarders with whom the skaters share the space of Shimao Square.

Another important aspect is the sense of community that characterizes skateboarding in the capital of Shandong. Since my first visit at *Hui skate shop*, I was struck by the communal atmosphere that permeated the little space as skateboarders passed time together, in the family they created for themselves. I argue that one possible reason behind the strong relationship shared by most members is the result of the contained nature of the skate scene, which presents very few skate spots and a rather small, albeit growing, group of skaters. Furthermore, the skate shop is presented as the concrete representation of the tightness of the community acting as a gathering place, playing a role that is equally as important as that of the skate spots. Again, this aspect fits rather snugly in the general context of skateboarding; similar cases have been recorded both in China (Li, 2018) and abroad (Dupont, 2014).

The third aspect that I analyze can appear to be in contrast with the idea of harmonious community that is the skateboarding scene in Jinan. In fact, as it can be found in a number of subcultures (Dupont, 2014; Thornton, 1995; Xiao, 2015), internal hierarchies within a certain subculture are quite common. In the case of Jinan, I argue that the factors that determine one's position within the community can be found in one's skills, commitment to the subculture and skateboarding experience. Indeed, those who are new to the scene and less skilled will occupy a lower position in the pyramid, while the highest steps accommodate the veterans, that are regarded by the most as examples to follow. However, these positions are fluid, as one can climb the hierarchical stair by being committed and improving one's skills and experience. At the same time, the way hierarchical subdivision is perceived is highly subjective, especially in the case of skateboarders with high subcultural capital.

This thesis also confirms considerations made by scholars (Beal, 1995, 1996; Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie, 2005; Slee, 2011) with regard to the unbalance between the number of male and female skateboarders. Jinan is indeed an extreme case, as for the whole duration of my research I have not encountered even one female skater. Moreover, male participants appear to be untouched by this discrepancy, and do not question it. This is an indicator that, although this situation is probably not the result of intended discrimination, the enormous gap between the amount of male and female skateboarders needs to be addressed. Indeed, my research cannot present enough data to draw a definitive conclusion in regard, but it presents a base on which to conduct further studies, whether in Jinan or in other areas of China.

I then illustrate two peculiar aspects of skateboarding in Jinan. First, I discuss the way skaters in Jinan negotiate the two contrasting aspects of skateboarding: subculture and sport. While still recognizing themselves as part of an alternative culture, they support the policies that national agencies carry out in order to promote the athletic side of skateboarding. The majority of interviewees understand that international events such as the Olympics can lead to more exposure and growth for Chinese skateboarding, both on the national and local level. Moreover, a number of participants expressed their strong desire for local authorities to favor skateboarding in the city, by creating infrastructure and providing access for the public by integrating skateboarding in school curricula. The reason that led skateboarders in Jinan to embrace beliefs that are quite controversial in the skateboarding world is fairly straightforward: they are generally unsatisfied with the status of the local and national skate scene and hungry for more and see the intervention of authorities as the most efficient way to reach their goal.

Finally, my research shows that skateboarders in Jinan are highly committed to their scholastic results, prioritizing their studies to skateboarding. I argue that an explanation for this characteristic

can be found in contemporary Chinese society. In fact, young generations experience very high pressure to perform well in school, in order to create a bright future. This leads them to concentrate all their efforts towards their studies and dedicate time to their passion only once they completed their obligations. At the same time, I argue that a number of skaters whose parents opposed their choice to skateboard, fearing that it could lead to poor academic performance, prioritize their studies in order to gain the trust of their parents and leverage them into allowing them to skateboard in their free time.

This thesis contributes to the field of contemporary subculture studies, by investigating the values and beliefs that make the members of the skate community in Jinan different from outsiders. Moreover, I believe that my study can add to previous research on skateboarding subculture both globally and in the context of China. On the one hand, a number of the characteristics found in the specific context that I studied are directly linked with practices shared by skateboarders all over the world. On the other hand, some of the aspects discussed are in fact the direct consequence of local factors, that make skateboarding in Jinan different not only from communities abroad, but from other realities in the country too.

Finally, although my research is limited to Jinan, the fact that both the local skate scene and the context in which it is immersed are very dynamic and constantly changing, could lead further research to highlight new interesting aspects that have not yet emerged during my study. Indeed, I believe this thesis can provide the grounds for future projects on skateboarding in mid-sized, peripheral Chinese cities such as Jinan, to compensate for the attention directed by previous scholars mainly to first-tier and new first-tier international cities. Moreover, I hope that this thesis can encourage future research on youth cultures in China. I believe in the importance of understanding the dynamics that shape local subcultural communities, leading participants to share similar ideals and behaviors, as well as giving birth to unique characteristics that make every scene a little special.

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## APPENDIX

### Questions for skateboarders in Jinan

1. 你叫什么？

What's your name?

2. 你今年多大？

How old are you?

3. 你学习还是工作？你学什么？/你做什么工作？

Do you work or study? What's your major/occupation?

4. 你在哪里长大的？

Where did you grow up?

5. 你滑板已经多久了？

How long have you been skateboarding?

6. 你怎么开始滑板？

How did you begin skateboarding?

7. 请介绍一下你的生活方式。

Please describe your lifestyle.

8. 你多久滑板一次？

How often do you skateboard?

9. 一般你和谁一起滑板？

Who do you usually skate with?

10. 你一般在哪里滑板？



Where do you usually skate?

11. 你参加过滑板比赛吗?

Have you taken part in skateboarding competitions before?

12. 你拍过滑板视频吗?

Have you ever filmed skate videos?

13. 你喜不喜欢看关于滑板杂志/网站/视频/播客等等?

Do you read skateboarding magazines/watch videos/films/blogs etc.?

14. 你经常买滑板品牌的衣服吗?

Do you buy clothes and accessories from skateboarding brands?

15. 你最喜欢那些滑手?

Who are your favourite skateboarders?

16. 滑板对你意味着什么?

What does skateboarding mean to you?

17. 你会如何定义滑板?

How would you define skateboarding?

18. 你对济南滑板运动有什么看法? 你对中国滑板运动有什么看法?

What do you think of the skateboarding scene in Jinan? And what about China?

19. 在目前中国社会里滑板是怎么看待的?

How do you think skateboarding is perceived in today's Chinese society?

20. 您认为中国的滑板运动是否被视为一种教育活动(例如演奏乐器或运动)?

Do you think skateboarding is perceived as an "educational" activity (such as playing a musical instrument or a sport)?

21. 你家人支持你滑板吗？你的朋友呢？

Does your family support your choice to skateboard? What about your friends?

22. 你认为滑板与家庭和教育背景之间有联系吗？不熟悉滑板的人向你表达过偏见吗？

Do you think there is a connection between one's choice to skateboard and one's family and education background?

23. 不熟悉滑板的人向你表达过偏见吗？

Have you encountered any kind of prejudice by people who are not familiar with skateboarding?

24. 你有没有因为滑板而在公共场所发生口头或物理争吵？

Have you ever had any conflict (both verbal and physical) with people in public spaces because of skateboarding?

25. 你如何看待你和权威的关系？（父母、老师、警察、保安等等）

How would you consider your relationship with authority? (Parents, teachers, law enforcement etc.)

26. 你想在未来保持滑板吗？你想成为一名职业滑手吗？

Would you like to keep skateboarding in the future? If yes, professionally?

27. 你觉得滑板将来会在中国更受欢迎吗

Do you think skateboarding will be more popular in China in the future?

28. 你对中国滑板运动的未来有什么期望和希望？

What expectations and hopes do you have for the future of skateboarding in China?