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A Study of the Role of Social Processes in Relation to Popular Culture

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Abstract. Driven by the wave of globalization and the technological revolution, pop culture is like a prismatic mirror, which reflects the trajectory of social change and, at the same time, quietly alters the landscape of our lives. This study takes the phenomenon of Chinese and global pop culture as an observation sample, and combines big data analysis and real cases to explore the two-way construction mechanism between social process and pop culture. The study discovers that pop culture reconfigures social cognition via symbolic production and dissemination. It reflects structural conflicts, such as those between generations and genders, and also empowers disadvantaged groups. Moreover, it reshapes urban - rural relations and national cultural identity by means of symbolic power. This shows that popular culture is not only a “mirror” of social phenomena, but also a “pusher” for social change. While it mirrors social conflicts, it also injects new vitality into society and builds bridges for more inclusive development in a unique way. This study helps us to see the close connection between popular culture and social development, and to understand that popular culture is not just an entertainment pastime, but also an important participant in social change. At the same time, it also provides practical ideas and directions for us to better utilize popular culture to promote social progress and foster understanding and integration among different groups.

Keywords: popular culture, social contradictions, social mirroring, gender empowerment, intergenerational dialogues

1. Introduction

When people enjoy the rural life shown in short videos or discuss the gender narratives in TV dramas on social media, they may not be aware that they are taking part in a silent social change. Pop culture has long transcended the boundaries of entertainment, becoming a “dynamic mirror” that reflects social conflicts and shapes group perceptions. In the past, most studies have concentrated on unidirectional impacts. For example, Bourdieu's cultural sociology focuses on how social culture maintains and reinforces social relations by reflecting different interests [1], and Baudrillard criticizes how consumer culture domesticates individuals [2]. However, there is still a research gap on the dynamic interaction mechanism between the two. The research breakthrough of this paper lies in constructing a two-way analytical framework to explore how popular culture reflects social contradictions and how it reacts to social processes through symbolic power. Through

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an interdisciplinary research method, it reveals the internal logic of the two-way construction of culture and society. This exploration not only provides a new theoretical perspective for understanding the dynamic interaction between culture and society, but also provides a path of reflection from a cultural perspective to alleviate social conflicts, which is of practical significance for the policy formulation of cultural governance.

2. Connotation and characteristics of popular culture

When asked about pop culture, people will mostly recall the most recent hit movie, popular makeup and dress, or the Internet buzzwords in social media, but the academic community has not yet formed a consensus on the definition of pop culture. Sun Ruixiang points out that contemporary Chinese popular culture is dominated by the market mechanism, relying on modern production and mass media, focusing on the entertainment and consumption needs of urban groups, and presenting the typical characteristics of fashionization and industrialization [3]. And Giddens defines pop culture as a form of entertainment that can be watched, read, or participated in by as few as a few million or as many as tens of millions of people [4]. Here, popular culture can be simply summarized as a daily cultural form that the public enjoys and spontaneously follows and participates in, and its core features mainly include:

(1) Dynamism: technology-driven and rapid iteration through the economic cycle

Dynamism is reflected in the rapid turnover of the content and form of popular culture. Technological innovation and the economic cycle together accelerate the life cycle of cultural products [5]. For example, through algorithmic recommendation technology, short video platforms have shortened the life cycle of "Netflix songs" from months to weeks in the traditional music industry. Songs such as "The Lonely and the Brave" quickly became popular through short video distribution and were quickly replaced by new content. In such an environment, people can clearly feel the rapid rise and fall of pop culture like the tide, with new hot spots emerging and being quickly replaced by the next trend. This fast-changing pop culture ecology not only demonstrates the powerful influence of technology and economic forces, but also allows people to constantly search for new resonance and identity in the dizzying waves of culture.

The impact of technological iteration on the reconstruction of cultural forms is equally significant. For example, the 2024 domestic game Black Myth: Wukong topped the global game sales charts in many countries on its first day of release, thanks to the mythical world of Journey to the West presented by Unreal Engine technology. However, its popularity rapidly entered a period of decay as players progressed through the game, forcing developers to extend the product life cycle through additional game content. This indicates that the only way to create works with lasting vitality and achieve the inheritance and dissemination of cultural values is to dig deeply into cultural connotations, continuously innovate the form of content, and allow for the in - depth integration of culture and technology.

(2) Popularity: universal participation and mass creativity

Massiveness is reflected in the wide range of participating groups and the decentralization of cultural production [6]. Previously, cultural creation was mainly dominated by professional organizations or a small number of celebrities. Nowadays, whether they are young or old, or people with different occupations and educational backgrounds, they can easily take part in it. Ordinary people can publish their works on social networks like short - video platforms. This change has allowed cultural production to no longer be monopolized by a small number of people, as dances choreographed by square dance aunts, lyrics written by middle school students and city vlogs made by takeaway boys can all become part of popular culture.

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At the same time, the creativity of groups has further promoted the diversification of cultural forms. For example, folk dances such as Yunnan's “Song Dance” and Qinghai's “Swing” have transformed regional cultures into global trends through short-video platforms. 2024's “Subject 3” dance has sparked a transnational imitation frenzy on TikTok due to its simple movements and distinctive rhythms. In 2024, the “Subject 3” dance sparked a transnational imitation craze on TikTok because of its simple movements and distinctive rhythms, allowing the world to feel the unique charm of Chinese online culture in the swing. These cases vividly prove that the popularity of popular culture is breaking down geographical and cultural restrictions, and every participant is both a consumer and a shaper of culture. This cultural ecology of universal participation allows people of different colors and languages to share their creativity and love through the bridge built by pop culture; it also allows culture to break through the inherent boundaries and revitalize itself through the relay innovation of countless individuals.

(3) Media Dependency: Globalized Communication Empowered by Social Platforms

Media dependency means that popular culture is highly dependent on social media and digital platforms to complete the communication chain. Take TikTok as an example, its algorithmic recommendation system has made Guizhou's Dong songs unexpectedly popular in 2023 through the “tag challenge” mode. When the video of Dong girls singing folk songs in traditional costumes was labeled with the hashtag #ethnicitychallenge, the platform automatically pushed it to users with similar interests around the world, forming a chain of communication with hundreds of millions of plays within two weeks. This kind of technological empowerment allows the originally closed minority cultures to go straight to the international cultural stage without being filtered by traditional media.

However, the media dependency of social platforms not only accelerates the dissemination of culture, but also reshapes its content. A similar case is the rise of “cloud child rearing” culture on short video platforms. Many young people are unable to raise their children due to real-life pressures, so they seek emotional comfort by watching videos of their children on platforms such as Jieyin. With the increase in the number of participants, the platform began to push a lot of related content, many parents in order to obtain traffic, began to deliberately create a child's “persona”. From the original simple record of the child's growth, gradually evolved into a performance nature, catering to public preferences mode. The culture of “cloud child rearing” has also changed from an emotional attachment to a product with commercial attributes and being held hostage by traffic. It can be seen that media dependence has reconstructed the core of culture while breaking down the barriers of communication. How to rely on media communication while keeping the core connotation of culture and preventing the meaning from being emptied by technology has become a key issue that must be solved for cultural communication nowadays [7].

The three main characteristics of popular culture are intertwined, with dynamism driving content innovation, popularity guaranteeing cultural vitality, and media dependence breaking through geographical boundaries. Under the synergistic effect of technology, economy and social media, popular culture has become an important window to observe the changes of modern society, vividly reflecting the spirit of the times.

3. Social contradictions reflected in popular culture

3.1. Reproduction and challenges of gender contradictions

Pop culture serves as a mirror image of social contradictions, and is particularly notable on the topic of gender. Many break through and boldly expose gender contradictions. For example, the Chinese

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movie Spring Tide uses the vicious relationship between mother and daughter to expose the oppression of women in society. The mother uses traditional filial piety to bind her daughter, and the daughter fights against the control through indifference, exposing the double bondage of traditional gender precepts on two generations of women. This conflict is echoed in Japanese popular culture, as in Saw Man, Makima's initial power is far greater than that of the male characters, but she is reduced to a “tool” for the male protagonist as the plot progresses. This indicates that even in works with female protagonists, the “male - centered” narrative still prevails in the story. Unfortunately, most of this resistance has been co-opted by capital, whether it is social media turning the MeToo movement into a traffic topic, or luxury advertisements tying the success of women in the workplace to consumption, all of which are distracting from the real problem of inequality. Capital has skillfully transformed these originally sharp gender critiques into eye-catching commercial selling points, dissolving the social critical power that cultural works are supposed to have, and making the road to resolving gender contradictions more and more tortuous and long under the interference of capital.

It can be seen that every breakthrough in gender resistance in popular culture may be transformed by commerce, but new resistance will grow in the cracks again. This cycle just proves that change never advances in a straight line, but rather climbs in a spiral, with new breakthroughs lurking around every blocked bend. As Sigamani & P. U. emphasize, it is only by exposing the inertia of power that gender violence can truly be stopped from repeating itself over and over again [8].

3.2. Age exclusion and intergenerational conflicts

Popular culture also deeply reflects the value breaks and conflicts between generations. Age exclusion not only reflects the differences in cultural consumption, but also maps the structural contradiction between the distribution of social resources and cultural discourse. By pursuing sub - cultures like hip - hop and electronic music, young people deliberately distinguish themselves from their parents' preference for classical music and theater, thereby strengthening their social identity. This intergenerational conflict is further intensified in the context of globalization. In China, the phenomenon of Jay Chou's music has triggered a typical intergenerational confrontation. In terms of content, Jay's works clearly present the psychological characteristics and sense of resistance of adolescents around the millennium, which are rich in subcultural characteristics that reflect the tendency of adolescents to express their individuality, seek peer recognition, and rebel against parental rules and regulations. Jay Chou's fusion of R&B and Chinese style and his fuzzy and lazy singing voice are regarded as cultural innovations by the young group, but are criticized by some middle-aged listeners as “slurring words” and “deviating from the tradition. [Behind this conflict is the fact that in the process of rapid modernization, young people try to reconstruct their identities with popular culture, while the older generation relies on classical culture to maintain social authority.

The essence of intergenerational conflict is the collision of values and cultural dominance among different age groups. Young people challenge the traditions upheld by their fathers and mothers by creating a new wave of culture, which is essentially a competition for the right to social discourse and distribution of resources. Globalization and the Internet age have accelerated cultural differentiation, and intergenerational conflicts have escalated from aesthetic differences to a deeper confrontation of power. This kind of conflict is both the inevitable result of social transformation and the driving force for cultural renewal. The two generations are confronting and integrating at the same time, ultimately pushing the society to form a new cultural model in the pull of tradition and innovation.

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4. Popular culture reacts to social processes through symbolic power

4.1. Short video symbols reconstruct urban and rural cognition

In the field of popular culture, short videos have reconstructed urban and rural cognition through the practice of symbolic power, and become an important cultural force in shaping the social process. As a carrier of popular culture in the digital age, short videos break the fixed pattern of urban-rural dichotomy in traditional media through the production, dissemination, and sharing of content, not only changing people's inherent views of urban and rural areas, but also bringing new possibilities for improving the relationship between urban and rural areas.

Take Li Ziqi's short video works as an example, she uses poetic camera language to show traditional Chinese rural life, transforming elements such as farming, food and handicrafts into symbols full of aesthetic value. In the video, the simple and ancient countryside buildings, leisurely idyllic scenery, and traditional way of life break the stereotypical impression of city dwellers of the countryside as “backward” and “closed”, and make the countryside culture become a “yearning for life “ symbol, stimulating the public's sense of identity and curiosity about rural culture. According to statistics, Li Ziqi's YouTube account has over ten million subscribers. The wide dissemination of her works has made the countryside no longer a “cultural depression” in the city but a spiritual habitat with unique charm.

Short videos also play a key role in the dissemination of urban culture. In recent years, urban landmarks such as the skyscrapers of Lujiazui in Shanghai and the glittering night view of Guangzhou Tower have been refined into symbols of “modern cities” through a large number of aerial and time-lapse photography works on short video platforms. Through creative editing and exaggerated expression, short-video creators symbolize and package elements such as the city's characteristic architecture, cuisine, and humanistic activities, which reshapes the public's perception of the city's cultural diversity, thus attracting a large number of tourists to experience it and promoting the development of the city's cultural tourism industry. Through symbolic expression, short videos not only give new communication vitality to urban culture, but also further dissolve the gap between urban and rural cultural cognition, and become an important medium to promote social and cultural integration and cognitive innovation [9].

4.2. Reinforcement of cultural identity by the popularity of national symbols

In the era of globalization, the spread and popularity of cultural symbols not only reflect the exchange of different cultures, but also an invisible power struggle. Just as countries are subconsciously expanding their influence through film and television productions, brand images and even Internet buzzwords. Among them, cross-cultural communication of national symbols often becomes a double-edged sword to strengthen cultural identity. Taking Disney's live-action film Mulan as an example, the movie adapted the Chinese legend into a global cultural product, which strengthened the international dissemination of Chinese symbols, but also triggered the cultural belonging controversy due to the intervention of Western perspectives. This appropriation and reconstruction of symbols not only challenges the purity of local culture, but also causes society to re-examine the boundaries of its own cultural identity. Chinese Internet literature is gaining increasing popularity and recognition from global readers by virtue of its diverse topics, it was difficult to enter the Arab region due to cultural differences [10], indicating that symbol dissemination needs to be adapted to local culture.

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In summary, the popularity of national symbols is both a catalyst for cultural identity and a microcosm of the international power game. Both the nation and the state need to export soft power through symbols, but also need to be alert to the dissolution of cultural subjectivity in globalization. On the one hand, they should adopt an open attitude and integrate the elements of national characteristics into world culture, making them part of world culture. On the other hand, they should always stay awake and safeguard the uniqueness of their own culture. Only in this way can a nation and a country fully exert the influence of their own culture in the global cultural competition without getting lost in the wave of cultural convergence.

5. Conclusion

By analyzing the phenomenon of Chinese and global popular culture, this study reveals the two-way construction mechanism between social process and popular culture. Pop culture not only mirrors structural conflicts such as gender conflicts and urban-rural differences, but also plays a positive role in reshaping national cultural identity and promoting cultural dissemination through symbolic power. In the future, we should not only make good use of the communication power of popular culture, so that it can become a bridge to alleviate social conflicts and promote cultural integration; we should also be vigilant against the dissolution of cultural connotations by capital and technology, and guard the core values and diversity of culture. Only by grasping the dynamic balance between popular culture and social development can popular culture truly become a positive force to promote social progress and enhance cultural confidence, and continue to revitalize and energize itself in the wave of the times.In addition, this study has certain limitations. On the one hand, the study is mainly based on literature analysis and case studies and lacks specific data support. As a result, some of the conclusions are insufficient in terms of general applicability and quantitative data verification. On the other hand, although the selected samples of pop - culture phenomena cover both local and global cases in China, the study lacks depth in the areas of regional cultural diversity and niche subcultures, making it difficult to comprehensively present a complex picture of the two - way construction between popular culture and the social process. This makes it difficult to present a comprehensive picture of the complex two-way construction of popular culture and social processes. In view of the above shortcomings, future research can be carried out from various aspects. First, empirical research methods such as questionnaire surveys can be introduced to enhance the scientific validity and persuasiveness of the research conclusions through quantitative analysis of the data; second, the scope of the research sample can be expanded to explore the interactive relationship between subcultures of different geographic regions and types and the social process, so as to further improve the understanding of the mechanism of the bidirectional construction of popular culture and society.

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