

Youth Identity Reconstruction in Transnational Cultural Flows: The Impact Mechanism of Korean Idol Culture on China's Stratified Cultural Phenomena

Xianzhe Shang

Faculty of Humanities and Arts, Macau University of Science and Technology, Macau, China

1230009737@student.must.edu.mo

Abstract. In the context of digital technology-driven global cultural flows, the permeation of Korean idol culture into China's youth "stratified cultural phenomena" has emerged as a focal concern. This study adopts a transnational cultural flow theoretical lens, integrating both in-depth interviews and digital ethnographic methods, to systematically interrogate the penetrative mechanisms through which Korean idol culture infiltrates Chinese youth subcultures. Specifically, it examines the triangulated forces of industrial standardization, algorithmic platform architectures, and affective labor dynamics. The analysis reveals that the K-pop entertainment industry constructs hegemonic cultural frameworks via algorithmic collusion and standardized industrial exports, enabling the internalization of foreign cultural influences through data-driven participatory labor among Chinese youth. While fan communities exhibit localized resistive practices through symbolic hybridization, technological appropriation, and ethical renegotiation, these innovative articulations remain circumscribed by the original cultural schema, manifesting a distinctive "dependent resistance" modality. This paradox underscores the dialectical tension between globalizing cultural forces and local identity formations, producing fragmented value systems and contested subjectivities among youth. To address these complexities, this study advocates for cultural governance frameworks that recognize the fluidity of youth cultural practices, calibrate regulatory mechanisms with openness to hybridity, and cultivate institutional inclusivity. Such strategies may enable the activation of endogenous cultural productivity while fostering resilient spaces for the negotiation of youth subjectivity in an era of digitized cultural globalization.

Keywords: Youth identity reconstruction; transnational cultural flows; Korean idol culture.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Digital technologies have profoundly reshaped transnational cultural flows, altering the forms and pathways of global cultural exchange. Korean idol culture--encompassing K-pop, K-dramas, and fan economies--has emerged as a hallmark of East Asian cultural industries. Leveraging platform capitalism's algorithmic logic and affective marketing strategies, it has transitioned from regional expansion to the construction of global cultural communities. Recent collaborations between Korean entertainment conglomerates and Chinese digital platforms have introduced idol training systems, data-driven fan engagement models, and aesthetic standards into Chinese youth culture, forming a closed loop of "cultural standard export--localized reproduction--affective value amplification".

Simultaneously, Chinese youth participation in globalization and transnational cultural consumption has complicated understandings of culture and identity, manifesting in "stratified cultural phenomena" which centered around "fan communities", youth communities construct semi-closed, hierarchical cultural spaces through data labor, symbolic reconstruction, and organized activism [1].

These subcultures exhibit both dependency on Korean idol industries (e.g., adopting ranking rules and mimicking fan symbols) and resistive practices via technological adaptation (e.g., Weibo Super Topic integration) and hybridizing local elements (e.g., blending Hanfu with K-pop performances).

However, the intensifying insularity and datafication of these subcultures reflect deepening anxieties over youth identity negotiation amid global-local tensions.

1.2. Research Questions and Significance

This study investigates the mechanisms through which Korean idol culture influences China's stratified youth phenomena across three dimensions: cultural power penetration, identity construction practices, and sociostructural implications. First, it deconstructs how Korean entertainment industries reshape aesthetic standards and consumption logics in Chinese youth culture via platform algorithms and regionalization strategies. Second, it examines how Chinese fan communities dynamically negotiate identity through symbolic hybridization, organizational innovation, and ethical adaptation under technologically mediated transnational flows. Third, it reveals how stratified cultural insularity, data fetishism, and power hierarchies reflect crises in Chinese youth cultural identity and social mobility.

At the theoretical level, this study proposes an innovative three-tier analytical framework that integrates global, regional, and local dimensions, thereby surpassing the constraints of the conventional "center-periphery" dichotomy prevalent in cross-cultural communication scholarship. By synthesizing the conceptual paradigms of "regionalization" and "hybridization," it illuminates the dual roles of digital platforms--specifically, their technological agency and cultural mediating capacities--thus enriching the comprehension of the dynamic interplay between technological capitalism and cultural politics. At the practical level, this research dissects the mechanisms underpinning technological dependence and emotional mobilization within the context of circle culture, while concurrently examining the transformative potential of cultural hybridization practices within fan communities. These findings offer robust pathways for shaping youth value systems and fostering local cultural productivity, thereby contributing significantly to the domains of social governance and cultural development.

2. Method

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This study employs transnational cultural flow theory and youth subcultural cultural studies as its analytical framework, integrating cultural hybridity theory, cultural proximity theory, and affective labor theory to systematically examine the dynamic mechanisms through which Korean idol culture influences Chinese youth stratified cultural phenomena.

Building upon Bhabha's cultural hybridity theory, the research identifies distinctive patterns of creative resistance within Chinese fan communities. These communities engage in localized practices such as "Sinicized fan chants" and hybrid cultural productions (e.g., Hanfu-K-pop performance fusions) to symbolically contest Korean cultural hegemony, while remaining structurally constrained by transnational cultural capital [2]. This theoretical perspective illuminates the complex "resistance-negotiation-dependency" continuum in fan identity construction.

Drawing on Oh's reconceptualization of cultural appropriation as a practice embedded in global power dynamics, the analysis reveals how the Korean entertainment industry strategically combines Western musical elements (e.g., hip-hop, R&B) with Asian cultural values to generate hybrid creativity. This dual process leverages U.S. cultural hegemony for market expansion while cultivating distinctive stratified cultural capital through localized reproduction, thereby exemplifying Korea's dual role as both cultural importer and exporter in global cultural flows [3].

The cultural proximity theory further elucidates how Sino-Korean cultural affinities facilitate transnational diffusion. Wang and Park's findings regarding Chinese students' preference for K-pop's "modernized capitalist aesthetics" align with the modernization aspirations of China's younger generations [4]. Expanding upon Ouyang's research on symbolic consumption, this study identifies "celebrity magnetism" and "identity recognition imperatives" as primary drivers of K-pop

consumption among Chinese international students, underscoring the pivotal role of consumerist affect in fan engagement [5].

Empirical evidence demonstrates that the Korean idol industry's global expansion operates through industrial standardization and collusion with platform capitalism. As Ma observes, data-driven fan support activities (e.g., chart manipulation, comment moderation) simultaneously strengthen virtual affective communities and intensify inter-fandom competition and consumerist alienation [6]. Liu's examination of post-95s Chinese fan communities further reveals how stratified cultural hierarchies (e.g., data ranking systems) discipline youth subjectivity through hybrid identity construction [7].

However, current scholarship exhibits two critical limitations: 1) excessive emphasis on cultural representation at the expense of structural analysis of social networks and causal mechanism exploration; 2) insufficient attention to generational disparities, particularly regarding technological habitus differentiation and varying intensities of national identity between post-95s and post-00s cohorts. These theoretical gaps present crucial opportunities for conceptual expansion in this research.

2.2. Methodology

2.2.1. Research methodology and objective

This study adopts a qualitative research paradigm, utilizing in-depth interviews and online ethnography as its core methods, with the aim of exploring the dynamic interplay between the infiltration of Korean cultural power and the resistance practices of Chinese youth. The research design is grounded in interpretivist and constructivist methodologies, emphasizing the importance of understanding fans' subjective experiences and cultural practices to elucidate the social structural meanings underlying their behaviors.

2.2.2. Sample selection and data collection

Furthermore, the study employs a purposive sampling strategy, selecting five Chinese K-pop fans as the core sample, which encompasses three distinct groups: the core layer (comprising one fan site manager responsible for organizing voting and support activities), the active layer (consisting of three high-frequency participants who regularly consume content and engage in community interactions), and the peripheral layer (represented by one low-activity participant who consistently follows but rarely engages publicly). The sample selection process fully accounts for variations in age, participation intensity, and technological usage to ensure diversity in the comparative analysis of practices.

Data collection was conducted through two primary approaches. First, in-depth interviews were guided by a semi-structured outline, focusing on four key themes: pathways of cultural contact, the logic of consumption behavior, negotiation of community rules, and responses to political controversies. For example, interviewees from the core layer were specifically questioned about the division of labor within the community, whereas those from the peripheral layer were probed about identity conflicts, such as "Why do you continue to follow but refrain from participating in data labor?" Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, was fully recorded, transcribed into text, anonymized, and labeled with codes (F1-F5) for identification. Second, online observation concentrated on publicly available social media data, including posts in Weibo super topics, fan-made videos on Bilibili, and bullet comments, while deliberately avoiding intrusion into private chat records to uphold research ethics.

2.2.3. Data analysis

In terms of data analysis, this study utilizes thematic analysis in combination with a critical theory framework, conducted in two distinct stages. The first stage involves repeatedly reviewing the transcribed texts and observation logs to identify core themes, such as "symbolic reconstruction," "technological adaptation," and "ethical adjustment," and to establish a "case-theme" mapping relationship [7]. For instance, cases in which fans integrate Korean idol stage movements with traditional Chinese opera postures are classified as "symbolic hybridization." The second stage

focuses on theoretical integration, engaging in a critical dialogue between the identified practice types and theories of regionalization and cultural hybridity. Additionally, this stage reveals how fans achieve limited resistance through localized rule innovations, thereby highlighting the tension between the infiltration of cultural power and the agency of youth.

3. Research Results

Through in-depth interviews and case study analyses, this research elucidates three predominant dimensions through which Korean idol culture influences Chinese youth stratified cultural ecosystems: 1) the infiltration pathways of cultural power dynamics, 2) hybrid resistance practices in stratified cultural reproduction, and 3) the regulatory mediation of policy environments on community behaviors.

3.1. Pathways of Cultural Power Infiltration

The Korean entertainment industry exerts profound influence on the Chinese market through its highly standardized industrial model, exemplifying the penetration of cultural power. Multiple interviewees noted that Chinese talent shows are frequently criticized for their "lack of originality" (F2, F4), a unidirectional mimicry reflecting Korea's dominant position in East Asia's cultural industry chain. This asymmetrical standardization perpetuates China's subordinate status in the transnational idol production ecosystem.

Platform capitalism further amplifies this dynamic through algorithmic recommendation mechanisms on Weibo and Bilibili. A core fan (F1) revealed tacit collaborations between platform operators and fan organizations: "Trending topic promotions are co-shaped by influential fan leaders and platform algorithms, leaving ordinary fans merely reactive." Such algorithmic logics not only magnify Korean cultural influence but also commodify fan "data labor" (e.g., chart manipulation, comment control) into fuel for the traffic economy.

More critically, sustained engagement in consumption and data labor facilitates fans' internalization of Korean cultural hegemony, culminating in what scholars term "self-projection and identification" through fandom practices [8]. The ambivalence expressed by an active-tier fan (F3) epitomizes this paradox: "I know chart rankings are capitalist games, but the sense of achievement when my idol rises keeps me hooked." This tension between critical awareness and affective investment underscores the nuanced mechanisms of cultural power internalization.

3.2. Hybrid Resistance Practices in Fan Communities

Chinese youth fan communities demonstrate "hybridized resistance" characterized by the infusion of localized elements into imitative practices. Semiotic reconfiguration emerges as a primary strategy: fans transform Korean fan chants into Chinese "xiéyīn gěng" (phonetic puns), such as adapting "saranghae" to "sàlàng hēi", aiming to dilute K-pop's "Korean-centricity." An active-tier fan (F3) explained: "We create Chinese nicknames for idols to neutralize cultural foreignness." However, such innovations often remain superficial, as derivative content still relies on Korean idol hashtags for visibility, exposing the inherent contradiction of hybrid resistance--localized symbols remain tethered to their original cultural frameworks.

Technological adaptation manifests in fans' reinvention of Korean ranking systems into Weibo Super Topic point-based mechanisms, establishing a localized "data labor" ecosystem. When confronting idol-related ethical controversies, communities develop pragmatic coping strategies. Ethical negotiation reveals fans' complex balancing act between affective attachment and cultural consumption. A prevalent compartmentalization strategy--asserting "idols are blameless; capital is culpable"--redirects moral accountability for idols' transgressions to corporate entities. While this temporarily preserves fandom legitimacy, it fails to resolve underlying value conflicts. A participant (F4) admitted: "Condemnations aside, album purchases persist; after all, our affective commitments

run too deep". This paradox underscores the fragility of hybrid resistance: when cultural consumption clashes with societal values, fans often prioritize emotional continuity over ideological consistency.

4. Discussion

This study reveals through multidimensional analysis that the influence of Korean idol culture on Chinese youth subcultures constitutes a dynamic interplay between global cultural hegemony and localized agency. Under the tripartite forces of cultural power infiltration, stratified cultural resistance practices, and ethical conflicts, Chinese youth identity reconstruction manifests the paradoxical characteristics of "dependent resistance"--simultaneously constrained by structural oppression yet sustaining subjectivity through strategic innovation.

The Korean idol industry, through industrial standardization and algorithmic collusion with digital platforms, establishes an implicit cultural monopoly. It posits that fans' perceived "sense of participation" operates as a mechanism of self-discipline: platforms employ quantified metrics (e.g., engagement points, trending indicators) to induce sustained investments in affective labor (e.g., chart manipulation, comment moderation), fostering cyclical dependency. This paradox of technological empowerment ostensibly enhances community organizational capacity while exacerbating hierarchical differentiation and data alienation. For instance, core fans' (F1) monopolization of topic promotion privileges confines ordinary participants to perpetual "respondent" roles within algorithmic frameworks, ultimately eroding agentic capacities.

Although Chinese fan communities demonstrate innovative resistance through semiotic reconfiguration, technological adaptation, and ethical negotiation, their dependency remains structurally entrenched [9]. The "Sinicized fan chants" exemplify the superficiality of localized innovation, as these practices remain tethered to original Korean cultural frameworks for visibility. Similarly, the reinvention of Weibo point systems--ostensibly empowering--replicates the competitive logic of Korean ranking mechanisms, intensifying intra-community power concentration rather than dismantling hierarchies. The "compartmentalization strategy" in ethical negotiations--attributing idol controversies to corporate manipulation--epitomizes pragmatic compromise: fans temporarily preserve fandom legitimacy through discursive reframing while evading deeper value conflicts. This "resistance in chains" model reflects the predicament of youth cultural autonomy within globalization, where innovation remains perpetually bounded by dominant cultural matrices [10,11].

The study further identifies youth identity construction as a tension-ridden process between transnational cultural consumption and local value systems. While K-pop communities provide affective belonging, participants simultaneously confront identity anxieties stemming from Sino-Korean sociocultural disparities. This pragmatic turn not only exposes the fragmentation of youth values but also mirrors the multidimensional identity fractures in globalization--youth emerge as "strategic actors" navigating emotional attachment and cultural allegiance. These findings validate the proposed tripartite framework of "cultural standard exportation--localized reproduction--affective value proliferation".

5. Conclusion

This study explores the dynamic mechanisms of youth identity reconstruction in transnational cultural flows. The Korean idol industry, leveraging industrial standardization, platform algorithms, and emotional labor, exerts cultural hegemony. In response, Chinese youth groups innovate resistance practices across symbolic, technological, and ethical dimensions, forming a unique "dependent resistance" phenomenon. Fans accept K-pop's cultural influence, interpreting it through their cultural background, and follow a "rejection--adaptation--internalization" path in cultural transmission.

Research reveals that youth identity construction is caught between global cultural hegemony and local values. Fans seek emotional belonging and self-worth confirmation through transnational

cultural consumption, yet face value conflicts in Chinese and Korean societies. This contradiction is especially evident in crisis-PR events: communities maintain star-chasing legitimacy via discourse segmentation and ethical adjustment but sacrifice deep public-issue engagement. Technological empowerment seemingly enhances organizational capacity but intensifies hierarchical differentiation and data alienation, with ordinary fans gradually losing subjectivity under algorithmic discipline.

Future research should focus on the reshaping effects of algorithm iteration and policy changes on subculture. For instance, will new technologies like the metaverse break existing resistance frameworks? Can local cultural innovation truly escape dependence? These inquiries hold significance beyond youth stratified cultural studies, offering critical insights for cultural governance in globalization. Policymakers must navigate the "openness--regulation--dialectic" to foster resilient youth subjectivity, preserving creative agency while mitigating structural inequities. Only through balanced institutional frameworks can sustainable cultural ecosystems emerge from globalization's crucible.

References

- [1] Swan A L. Transnational identities and feeling in fandom: Place and embodiment in K-pop fan reaction videos. *Communication Culture & Critique*, 2018, 11 (4): 548-565.
- [2] Bhabha H K. *The location of culture*. London: Routledge, 2012.
- [3] Oh D C. Theorizing cultural appropriation: Complications of globalization and power in hybrid K-pop. *Situations*, 2024, 17 (1): 25-50.
- [4] Wong C, Park J Y. Reception of K-pop contents among Chinese students in Korea. *The Journal of the Korea Contents Association*, 2013, 13 (11): 119-129.
- [5] Ouyang Q. Consumer society and symbolic fetishism. *Journal of Renmin University of China*, 2015, 29 (6): 66-74.
- [6] Ma J Q. *An exploration of cross-circle communication phenomena in fan group online behavior* (Master's thesis). Hainan Normal University, 2021.
- [7] Liu S Z. Noteworthy phenomena of cultural stratification and closure among the post-95 generation. *People's Tribune*, 2020, (12): 131-133.
- [8] Scharp K M, Sanders M L. What is a theme? Teaching thematic analysis in qualitative communication research methods. *Communication Teacher*, 2019, 33 (2): 117-121.
- [9] Ye M. Research on the cross-circle communication of virtual idol variety shows from the perspective of symbolic consumption. *Art and Technology*, 2024, 37 (3): 50-52.
- [10] Yang D X. On consumerism and identity construction of contemporary youth. *Contemporary Youth Research*, 2013, (2): 34-40.
- [11] Straubhaar J D. Beyond media imperialism: Asymmetrical interdependence and cultural proximity. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 1991, 8 (1): 39-59.