

# Disorder, Identity, and Fusion — A Cultural Interpretation of Tuwei Videos

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, Tuwei ("土味": The word is usually used to describe something tacky, not in line with the trend, not fashionable) videos have set off a wave of Tuwei culture on the Internet. This paper uses anthropological theory to interpret this emerging cultural phenomenon on the basis of participating observations and document analysis. The Tuwei video is a disorderly manifestation of young people in small towns drifting between the current urban and rural cultural structures in China. During its development, it forms a unique symbol system and cultural identity, and to a certain extent, as a state of fusion, dispels the pressure brought by the structure. The focus of this paper is to use the anthropological theory to explain the cultural reasons for the popularity of Tuwei videos.

*Keywords: Tuwei video, structure, disorder, identity, fusion*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a wave of "Tuwei" has quietly emerged on the Internet. Beginning in 2017, many bloggers with the word "Tuwei" in their names began to appear on Sina Weibo. They carried some "Tuwei videos" from Kuaishou or Tik Tok platforms to attract attention. The content was mostly Meipai Shake and melodrama with embarrassing performance composed of nonsensical exaggerated movements. And netizens can't help but continue watching while teasing the funny points of this kind of video. So far, the "Tuwei excavator" has 7.18 million fans, and its popularity is comparable to some second-tier stars. Tuwei videos have set off a trend of Tuwei culture on the Internet. Why does this kind of empty content and poorly produced Tuwei videos attract the attention of such a large group of netizens? Is there a deeper reason behind this cultural phenomenon?

Academic circle has made some preliminary results in the study of Tuwei culture. Most of the existing studies in the academic circle take the subculture theory as the perspective. For example, Chen Zhixiang[1], Hu Kai[2] and others have used various theories of the Birmingham School to analyze the generation, spread and fate of the Tuwei culture. In addition, some scholars such as Gao Cencao[3] discussed the formation and spreading mechanism of Tuwei culture from the perspective of media technology communication. There are also scholars such as Gu Mingmin[4] and Li Biao[5] and so on who are concerned about the self-awakening of rural young people and migrant worker group behind the Tuwei

video. Through the analysis of the meaning of various symbols in the Tuwei video, they explored the cultural trauma caused by the flow of urban and rural groups in the process of China's economic development.

To sum up, the previous studies in the academic circle have mostly analyzed the Tuwei culture from the perspective of subcultural theoretical paradigm and communication, focusing on the social reasons behind the Tuwei culture and the communication mechanism of the media, but lacking the understanding of the cultural logic behind the Tuwei culture. Therefore, this paper attempts to interpret and think about the Tuwei culture from the perspective of anthropology, in order to broaden the theoretical horizon of the study of this phenomenon and provide another perspective of observation.

## II. THE DEFINITION OF THE TUWEI VIDEO

The Tuwei video is a unique cultural phenomenon that has become popular in recent years. The term "Tuwei" originally originated from the topic series of "Chinese Tuwei" on post bar and MicroBlog. Netizens shared some tacky, embarrassing, and unfashionable phenomena in the topic for comments and ridicule. Subsequently, a group of bloggers who specialize in spreading Tuwei videos appeared on MicroBlog. The famous ones are "Tuwei Daddy", "Tuwei Excavator", etc. When they reposted the Tuwei videos on platforms like Kuaishou and Tik Tok, they attached a teasing introduction to attract the attention of netizens. With the increasing influence of these bloggers, the term "Tuwei" gradually appeared in the public's field of vision. A series of Tuwei cultures derived from the

word "Tuwei", such as Tuwei lover's prattle and Tuwei Emojis, have gradually formed. "Tuwei" is used to describe something that is relatively tacky and out of fashion with spoof. With its rich content and extensive participation, the Tuwei video has become the epitome and the most representative of the Tuwei culture. Therefore, this paper takes the Tuwei video as the main analysis object.

The Tuwei video didn't appear suddenly, its formation has gone through a certain fermentation process. The Tuwei video first appeared on Kuaishou and Tik Tok platforms, and then was secondly spread on the MicroBlog platform, and thus entered the public's field of vision. In the process of its formation, the changes in the field have caused obvious changes in the producer, motivation, content and public opinion evaluation of the Tuwei video:

From the point of view of the producers, the early Tuwei video authors were young people in small towns<sup>1</sup>. Their original intention of creating the video was not to deliberately look ugly to attract attention. They tried their best to catch up with the trend and express themselves, but limited by their own cultural level and social background, the videos they created were incompatible with mainstream aesthetics, resulting in the "Tuwei" of the video unconsciously. In the later period, as the Tuwei videos were moved to the platform of MircoBlog, some urban young people and social elites gradually joined the ranks of creators. They used the very style symbols and routines of the Tuwei videos to imitate and conduct secondary creation.

From the perspective of production motivation, if the motivation of early creators is to catch up with the trend and express themselves, then in the later stage, the motive of the creation of these Tuwei videos has turned to gain the attention of others by deliberately looking ugly and maliciously using the fun, and earn traffic to gain benefits under the operation of capital. On the other hand, those urban young people and elite groups use routine imitation to mock themselves, mainly using it to interact with other "Tuwei friends" and entertain themselves.

From the content point of view, in the early days, the Meipai Shake and shouting through microphone videos were mainly used for reasoning. The so-called Meipai Shake refers to the protagonist who has no dancing foundation performs some random movements along with the dynamic music, and then performs mechanical or random swings. The representative

characters are Pai Pai Qi, Qiuku Dashen Yingliu Zhizhu, etc. In the shouting through microphone monologue videos, the protagonist often uses simple shouting or monologue to say some classic "social quotations", for example: "If you were not by my side when I was in despair, then when I bob up like a cork in the future, who will know who you are?", "Don't go head-to-head with me, what I suffer is injury, and what you lose is your life". Their main highlight is the rich social experience of the characters. Most of these social quotations follow rhyming rules and are catchy and easy to perform. The representatives are Linghanzi, Dongyong Guaige Aoligei, etc. In the later period, a new force of Tuwei melodrama rises. Through its rich plot and exaggerated acting skills, it has been deeply loved by the majority of netizens. These melodramas mostly center on the content of brothers, the subcelestial and emotions. Some creators have formed unique video styles, and a large number of Tuwei celebrities have gradually appeared, such as Dudumei and Dark Dragon King and so on.

From the perspective of public opinion evaluation, different groups have naturally different public opinion evaluations of Tuwei videos. The audience and supporters of Tuwei videos are mostly small town youths and migrant worker group. These Tuwei videos allow them to find a suitable place for their habitation outside the mainstream culture, and at the same time conform to their original imagination of urban modern culture. They have obtained their self-positioning in the circle of this kind of Tuwei videos, so they naturally make positive comments on Tuwei videos. For those young people living in cities, they watch the Tuwei videos with an attitude of evaluating the ugly and seeking the novelty, which is naturally accompanied by abuse and disgust. However, with the further dissemination of Tuwei videos, the trend of public opinion evaluation has changed. Youth groups and even social elites in these cities gradually began to laugh at and tease themselves while watching the Tuwei videos, appearing the comments like: "I cried, what about you guys?", "I don't believe this is acting" and the like. They gradually found the carnival square in the comments of the Tuwei videos, and they were willing to "fall" to become Tuwei youths, joining the chasing ranks of the Tuwei videos in their imitation and self-mockery, and the evaluation of the Tuwei videos was reversed to a certain extent.

The Tuwei culture has undergone such rapid and huge changes in the short period of a few years, which is also an epitome of the rapid development of today's society. Where does "Tu" come from in Tuwei videos? Why is there a gradual reversal of public opinion in the process of disgusting Tuwei videos? Everything that appears in the Tuwei video is a condensed social reality and a reflection of group psychology, behind which contains deep cultural connotations. This paper

<sup>1</sup> According to the definition in the "Believe in Unimpressive Changes: White Paper on the Status of Youth Development in Small Towns in China of 2018" released by Southern Weekly, young people in small towns refer to young people who were born in counties and towns of the third-tier, fourth-tier and below, live and work in their hometowns, or go to big cities and cities around provincial capitals to work hard.

attempts to make a preliminary interpretation of it through related theories of anthropology.

### **III. THE "TU" OF TUWEI: STRUCTURE AND DISORDER**

The word "Tu (土)" has an important position in the hearts of the Chinese people. The Chinese people have always had a strong sense of treasuring native land and setting in stability. In the traditional cultural context, the meaning of the word "土" is usually commendatory. Mr. Fei Xiaotong used the book "Earthbound China" to describe the operation state of traditional Chinese society based on land. However, in the rapid changes of society, in the process of entering modern society from rural society, the lifestyles that people cultivated in rural society have produced bad effects everywhere. The modern society composed of strangers can't be dealt with the customs of the rural society. As a result, "土气 (rustic)" has become a derogatory term, and "village" is no longer a place to return home with high honors.[6] As an adjective, the meaning of "土" is constantly reconstructed by the changes of the times. Today, as the process of urbanization in China is accelerating, any things or concepts that are inconsistent with urban lifestyles and value habits are subconsciously classified as the rustic things. The trend of pursuit and self-expression of young people in small towns on the Internet has been referred to by mainstream groups as Tuwei videos, which to a certain extent reflects the current cultural separation between urban mainstream groups and township groups.

In anthropological theories, filth is not just unsanitary in the sense of hygiene or pathology, but embodies the contradictions and conflicts between social order and social structure. Similarly, as a kind of cultural evaluation, "土" is an inevitable product of structural disorder — where things are in structural disorder, they give people a certain filthy perception. People will not hate farmers living in rural areas, nor will they hate citizens living in cities. However, young people from small towns were born in rural areas but flocked to the cities, actively accepting and embracing modern lifestyles and values. However, this kind of embracing is on the surface due to their own background restrictions. As a result, young people in small towns are constantly drifting between the city and the countryside, tradition and modernity. The root of the public's disgust with Tuwei videos lies in the cognition blur caused by the incompatibility between the rural and urban, traditional and modern social and cultural structures of young people in small towns.

The reform and opening-up policy has brought profound changes to Chinese society. As the process of urbanization continues to accelerate, more and more rural youths have begun to work in cities. They are

attracted by modern lifestyles and ideological trends during their work in the city. However, the long-term shaping of traditional rural lifestyles, coupled with the limitations of the cultural level and economic conditions of young people in small towns, make their perception of mainstream culture and the trend of the times often backward and superficial. The characteristics of homogeneity in traditional rural society are obvious. Young people in small towns who grew up living in the countryside have a vague understanding of their own personalities and preferences, while modern urban culture emphasizes publicizing individuality and pursuing currents. The large-scale working trend has caused the opposition between rural and urban cultural structures to appear on young people in small towns. The reason why the structure of the opposition — disorder state continues — is because the young people in small towns have not really integrated into the city life: the main purpose of working determines that their time in the city is short, and their venues are limited to Internet cafes and entertainment venues such as ktv near their work places. Therefore, their understanding of currents is based on the superficial phenomenon of urban life they see, rather than truly becoming "urban people." However, they have accepted the modern lifestyle in their hearts, so it is impossible for them to return to the position of traditional "rural people". Therefore, under the wave of self-media and short videos, this state of disorder between the two structures is vividly demonstrated by the Tuwei video: they have not received systematic dance training, and can only perform awkward "Meipai Shake" with dynamic music; they have a longing for fashion but can't afford brand-name clothes, so they can only wear cheap clothes. In the bizarre and motley urban experience, gommino, leggings and leather wallets have become the representatives of fashion trends in their eyes. Even though some young people from small towns are willing to spend money on clothing, the values and lifestyles that they unconsciously display in the Tuwei videos also reflect the unbridgeable gap between them and the urban youth groups receiving higher education and modern lifestyles in a short time. Therefore, it is the blunt integration of some young people in small towns into modern lifestyles and mainstream culture that makes their videos look weird and awkward. This kind of nowhere to be placed outside the normal structural division of society is the root cause of the "Tuwei".

However, "As we know, filth is necessarily disordered, there is no absolute filth, and it only exists in the eyes of the viewer." [7] Therefore, "Tuwei" is low-level and vulgar for urban youths, but in the eyes of small town youths, Tuwei videos are a channel for them to find identity and group belonging.

#### **IV. IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF YOUTH IN SMALL TOWNS**

In the era of traditional media, the voice opportunities of mainstream media are mainly controlled by a small number of social elites. The rural society, which accounts for the majority of the population, has been speechless for a long time. Rural residents can only passively accept all the information transmitted by the mainstream media. With the development of technology and the change of media, young people in small towns finally have the opportunity to express themselves and make a voice. Although due to their cultural background and technical equipment limitations, their videos seem a bit boring or even inferior, but this can't resist their enthusiasm for sharing their lives. However, when the changes of modern media brought all social groups together on a public and open information platform, the videos produced by young people in small towns striving to pursue mainstream aesthetics were ridiculed by urban elite groups.

"Only when a large group of people can think of themselves as parallel to the lives of another large group of people — even if they have never met each other, they are of course moving along the same trajectory. Only at this time can this new, synchronic, and brand-new thing appear in history." [8] This brand-new thing is a group, an "artificial object" shaded by a special culture. As an "imaginary community", it represents cognitive facts in the sense of social psychology. [9] The embarrassing situation faced by young people in small towns makes them hope to seek self-identity and group belonging under the new media. They gradually find that more and more people are like them, and they are pursuing modern lifestyle and aesthetic interest with their own cognition. The videos they created reflect their common aspirations. Money, status and love are always the themes of the story. These factors have become the evaluation criteria of personal success. The pop songs and fashion dresses that appeared in the video represent their desire to pursue modern cultural trends.

However, small town youths can't become urban youths in a short time. Due to time and space constraints and the influence of their own growth environment, their understanding of urban culture and mainstream culture can only form a relatively superficial understanding. They always unconsciously deconstruct urban life and mainstream culture in their creation of Tuwei videos, but this deconstruction can only be one-sided and extreme. Therefore, young people in small towns gradually formed their own discourse system and symbolic expression in the process of creating and interacting with Tuwei videos.

Taking "social man" as an example, its original meaning refers to those social youths who are idle and

like to cause trouble. However, in the discourse system of small town youths, "social man" refers to successful people with rich experience. In the process of creating the video, they construct the life of successful people in the city they imagine, and imitate this style in the video, calling them "social men". The dressing of "social man" requires professional outfits. In summer, their standard outfits are short vests, leggings, gommino, as well as requisite sunglasses and wallets, while their standard outfits in winter must be mink coat and fur. In addition, high-end watches and tattoos are also one of the signs of social man. As a "social man", social quotations are indispensable, for example, "The sword is not sharp, the horse is too thin, and I don't want to fight with you yet!" and "The colorful world confuses your eyes, if you have no strength, you shouldn't show off in such an ostentatious manner." While social quotations despise others, they must also rhyme to reflect their extensive experience. The "social man" is often surrounded by a few younger boys and gorgeously dressed girlfriends as a manifestation of his power and status; speaking restrainedly and acting quietly are their criteria, which is reflected in the fact that they pay attention to the "in days to come" and "future" in case of trouble, and seem to have a calm attitude towards everything in front of them.

Young people in small towns have formed their own discourse system in the creation and interaction of Tuwei videos. The originally separated individuals complete the imaginative construction of the group under the common cultural experience, which is what Anderson calls "artificial objects of a specific culture." [10] They call each other "brother" in the live broadcast room or video comments, and interact and communicate with each other by sending "666" and giving a like to the video. They enjoy watching and creating Tuwei videos, enjoying popular Tuwei songs, and taking social quotations in Tuwei videos as their standard. In the process, they have found their identity and group construction.

The changes in the new media have turned the current society into an era where the traffic is king. While building their own discourse system, young people in small towns use the advantages of Tuwei video to get on the train of the traffic era. The emergence of many Tuwei Internet celebrities seems to have created an illusory channel that breaks the social class. Some young people in small towns believe that through weird images and exaggerated performances, they can win the attention of the public, and use this to bring huge traffic to become Internet celebrities, and to the road to success in their eyes. To some extent, this makes up for the disadvantaged status and lack of words of young people in small towns in actual life.

## V. THE TUWEI VIDEO AS A STATE OF "FUSION"

Society is in a structure when it is operating normally, but at certain moments, for example, in rituals, this structure is broken, and some groups of society participating in the ritual enter a state of blending called "threshold". In this, the previous social structure and classification are broken, and the participants enter the time and space of fusion. After that, the society returns to the right track, but the participants who have experienced the ritual are injected with new vitality. "Society is not so much a thing as it is a process — a dialectical process, which contains the successive stages of structure and fusion." [11] Turner believes that this threshold is a manifestation of fusion, and this fusion has different manifestations in many societies. For example, the millennium movement that became popular at the turn of the century bears considerable resemblance to the characteristics of the threshold in Ndembu tribal rituals. They all emphasize the equality and consistency of the individual in the ritual, in which status and wealth become meaningless, and everyone serves the collective, abandons selfishness, and treats others with kindness. These manifestations are in opposition to the "structure" of the normal operation of society.

Turner's interpretation of the threshold can help people better understand why the Tuwei video becomes popular. He pointed out: In human life, there seems to be a "need" — if we can use this controversial vocabulary — to make people participate in both forms. Those who urgently want to satisfy this "need" in their daily activities will look for it within the threshold of consciousness. [12]

The Tuwei video helps the young people in the small town find their spiritual belonging and group identity, and also helps them to leave the real time and space for a short time, allowing them to imagine the grassroots' counterattack of "a chequered career" in the world of Tuwei video, in order to make up for their lack of wealth and status in real life. In the virtual world constructed by young people in the small town, money, status and love are always the themes of the story. The protagonist of the story will inevitably achieve a counterattack at the end of the story after a brief setback. The protagonist who is resigned will sneer at the boss after success. After being betrayed by his brother, the protagonist will let the previous "brother" know what regret is. After being abandoned by his girlfriend, the protagonist will drive a luxury car after a counterattack to make his ex-girlfriend feel ashamed. And the content of social quotations and shouting through microphone reflects the virtual fantasy in the consciousness of young people in the small town. "Tianxia (天下", which means the world)", "man", "brother" and "king" are absolute high-frequency words

in their shouting through microphone. The performers are obsessed with fantasy about power and sex. While depicting the unattainable heroic ideals, they relieve their pessimistic and negative inner feelings, and even convey barbaric emotions and values that are incompatible with modern civilization. [13]

After the transformation of the field, Tuwei videos have gained secondary dissemination on the platforms such as MicroBlog. Some urban youths are attracted by the grotesque and clown-like performances in the Tuwei videos. While ridiculing these videos, they can't help but join the long-term viewing and interaction of Tuwei videos. These "Tuwei youths" mock, tease and laugh at themselves in the Tuwei video comment area spread by the Tuwei bloggers, gradually forming a kind of "Tuwei classroom" culture. The blogger who spread the Tuwei videos become the "teacher" in the "Tuwei classroom", and the Tuwei videos naturally become the "courseware". Self-mockery and humorous carnival remarks in the comment area are "class speeches". After class, imitating the Tuwei video to publish new works becomes the "homework", and the excellent "homework" will be named and praised by the "teacher". The comment area of the Tuwei video has become a carnival square for these urban youths, and they wantonly express exultant words. In the Tuwei video, some comments of teasing may appear. For example, if the protagonist's acting skills are really inferior, someone will comment: "How could this be acting? You guys lie to me!" If someone with better acting skills appears in the video, someone will comment: "I suggest you start your performance career right away." "XXX (referring to some popular traffic stars) should come here to learn acting skills!".

Here, all social hierarchies and original orders cease to exist, and all serious discourses and authority systems are eliminated. In today's fast-paced modern business society, many traditional rituals are gradually disappearing, and urban life has brought tremendous pressure to urban youth. In this case, the Tuwei video is perfectly wedged into the fragmented time of urban youth with its exaggerated and grotesque content and short duration. The heavy schoolwork and work pressure of the urban youth no longer exist here, and the traditional code of conduct and hierarchical order of real life dissipate briefly in the carnival square of the Tuwei video. The urban youth release the pressure brought by the "structure" of society through constant ridicule and self-mockery, and enter this short-lived but pleasant "Tuwei utopia" over and over again.

In the process of the popularity of the Tuwei video, whether young people in small towns use it to express themselves and find identity, or young people in urban areas use it to escape reality and release pressure, both of them seem to inject new vitality into themselves through this virtual and short-lived "fusion" to a certain

extent. After leaving the Tuwei video, they are back on the right track of their daily lives, but they need to use this short-lived "fusion" from time to time to help them relieve the confusion and pressure brought about by the numerous things in their lives. In modern society, many rituals in traditional society gradually fade out of people's vision. However, the society's demand for the state of fusion brought about by rituals has not disappeared. Instead, due to the fast pace of urban life and the frequent transitions between different identities, it has suffered greater mental pressure than before. This kind of internal structural contradictions in society need to be alleviated in various ways. The Tuwei video has replaced the role of traditional rituals to some extent. In the time and space of Tuwei, the suppression brought by the structure of daily life disappears. The grassroots as a representative of themselves in the eyes of young people in the small town are able to counterattack, and urban youths release all the pressures they endure in watching and teasing the old-fashioned plots and exaggerated performances of the Tuwei videos, and at the same time, they also participate in it, expressing their various dissatisfaction with real life in the form of self-mockery and satire. In this process, the contradictory pressure of the social structure in transition will also be temporarily dispelled. Young people in small towns work harder to pursue their ideal city life under the encouragement of the Tuwei video, while the urban youth get emotional release through this fusion and continue to return to their daily work and study. Therefore, the fusion makes the overall structure of society more stable.

People under the repression of "structure" help themselves to better adapt to real life through this dialectical process of structure — fusion — structure, and the society therefore resolves internal contradictions and conflicts. This may be the embodiment of the "intelligence" of the operating mechanism of human society.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The emergence of Tuwei videos is an epitome of the transformation of the media form and the transition of Chinese society in the context of urban-rural mobility. The Tuwei video breaks the cognitive barrier between urban and rural residents under the traditional media form in the form of self-mockery and performance. Although it has been rejected by mainstream groups due to its poor video content, for the first time, it makes the countryside outside the city enter the vision of mainstream society with such vivid images. The unease of the identity and belonging of young people in small towns in the flow of urban and rural areas has been relieved in the Tuwei video. They have found their identity and group belonging in the creation, sharing and communication of the Tuwei video. At the same time, the Tuwei video is also a Kaleidoscope for young

people in small towns to counterattack and chase their dreams, and is an outlet for urban youth and elite groups in the fast-paced modern urban life. To a certain extent, Tuwei videos have replaced the role of rituals, and have become a medium that society operates in the dialectical process of structure — fusion — structure.

In today's society, traditional media is declining, and the Internet places all groups in society on a public and open information square. The original rules and systems between groups are extended here, and "big traditions" and "small traditions" collide here, and as a result, a series of new cultural phenomena and problems emerge, providing the anthropology with new fields and texts for analysis, and also providing new impetus for the development of the discipline. It's needed to give play to the advantages of anthropological research methods and disciplinary thinking, pay attention to the existence of virtual communities and people in cyberspace, and conduct disciplinary analysis and thinking objectively, so as to help the Chinese society in transition to achieve good operation and development.

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