

The Emergence of “Zhenghuo” Internet Contents in Northeastern China as a Cultural Phenomenon An Analysis of Social Culture from a Perspective of Postmodernization

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ABSTRACT

With the tremendous social changes and the rise of the Internet, cultural and value variation becomes more divided and unbalanced in the 21st century. “Zhenghuo” video has emerged as a new cultural phenomenon on short video platforms in Northeastern China. This essay aims to analyse this specific phenomenon in terms of its production and consumption. It situates it in the context of post-industrial and postmodern Northeastern China and applies images analysis and interview to unearth its relationship with postmodernization. Based on Inglehart’s theory about modernization, this research argues that the popularity of “Zhenghuo” video reflects an alienized process of postmodernization and an uneven value shift. This value transformation is occurring with dynamics and diversity. This paper provides a new perspective to reconsider many cultural phenomena in postmodern China.

Keywords: *Zhenghuo, Short-video Platform, Northeastern China, Postmodernization*

1. INTRODUCTION

Northeastern China consists of three specific provinces of China: Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang. As a result of abundant natural resources and geopolitical relationship with the pre-Soviet Union, Northeastern China had a unique development history and won its position as the “old industrial base” of China. In the early 20th century, Northeastern China was an unpopulated area with a population of only hundreds of thousands who were mostly immigrants from inner China due to the policies of the late Qing Dynasty and adverse weather conditions in winter. After World War II (1939~1945) and the Chinese Civil War (1945~1950), the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949 with a socialist system. The central government of the PRC emulated the Soviet Union building a planned economy system with a priority of the development of the heavy industry. Because of the natural resources and geopolitical relationship with the Soviet Union and the supply demands during the Korean War (1950~1953), the central government decided to invest and build Northeastern China as a heavy industrial cluster. From the 1950s to the 70s, the industrial rate of Northeastern China raised dramatically with a massive growth of state-owned

enterprises [1]. By the end of the 70s, China implemented political and economic reforms which allowed market mechanisms and private economy to be parts of the economy [2, 3]. Without the support of the state policies, problems such as overproduction, rigid system and bureaucracy appeared very soon. Profit rates of the heavy industry enterprises shrank, investments dropped and a large number of enterprises bankrupted. Unemployment, urban poverty and crime rates rise were causing social issues while old values and culture formed during the industrialization period from the 50s to the 80s started to change [4]. People of Northeastern China started to doubt the spirit of hard-work and the ideology based on collectiveness. Cultural contents with characteristics of vulgarity and self-humiliation have occurred and been widely transmitted. Though the Chinese government has tried to revitalize Northeastern China economically and culturally, long-term challenges are expected [1].

With its unique social background, Northeastern China has started the process of postmodernization. In this process, “Zhenghuo” contents has emerged as a new cultural phenomenon. Taken the postmodernization theory, this research will discuss about the rise of “Zhenghuo” contents and the reasons for its popularity

among different groups. Inglehart firstly mentioned the concept of postmodernization in his work *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*. He used this concept to explain the social, cultural and value change that occurs after the process of modernization and industrialization. He illustrated the concept of postmodernization with the value shift from materialist value to post-materialist value. Within this shift, the society that used to hold values associated with the need for security and stability would turn its focus to non-material goals as post-materialism. In his argument, the society which holds post-materialism value treats self-expression and spiritual self-fulfillment as more important targets. Postmodernization cultural phenomenon are explained by this value change under his theory [5-8]. His research is well supported by the World Values Survey (WVS), a global research project that started in 1981 and is still ongoing in almost 100 countries and regions worldwide [9]. This research is based on his theory of postmodernization.

Most scholars appreciate Inglehart's theory. However, several defects of his theory are still under criticism. Flanagan, Hellevik and Van Deth mentioned that materialist and post-materialist value are not mutually exclusive [8, 10, 11]. Inglehart mentioned the opposition and the transformation but never demonstrated or explained the process of the shift from the materialist to the post-materialist value. Being relatively rigid, Inglehart's theory might not fully reflect the diversity of postmodernization with different economic, cultural and political backgrounds.

"Zhenghuo" contents, as the primary research object mentioned, was not broadly discussed by the scholars before. Very few relative studies could be found. Most of the research focuses on its upper category of culture "Tuwei." Wu's research focused on the cultural consumption of "Tuwei" contents. The research said audiences' motivation of consuming "Tuwei" contents is complex [12]. He surmised five possible consumption practices: ironic consumption, camp sensibility, referential reception, conscious consumption, and peeping. However, he did not consider the production and the consumption of "Tuwei" contents as a whole which makes his research lack a grand narrative of "Tuwei" as a cultural phenomenon. Chen's study covered analysis about "Tuwei" as a cultural phenomenon [13]. In his work, "Tuwei" culture is in the context of the rising Internet media form and the conflict between the urban and rural residents. His research built a general scheme of introducing "Tuwei" culture and using the conflict between the urban and rural residents is not persuadable enough since the inner diversity and complexity of the "Tuwei" contents.

This research combines content analysis with interview. Both methodologies are qualitative on an interpretivism basis. Specifically, it focuses on two pieces

of representative "Zhenghuo" videos which show the characteristics of "Zhenghuo" contents. Moreover, it conducts interview with the audiences of "Zhenghuo" contents from different social backgrounds to uncover the consumption mentalities. The interview question scheme focuses on interviewees' practical and cultural life stories to build analysis on their value and cultural transformation.

Inglehart's postmodernization theory was used in this research to analyze and interpret the content and interview materials. However, Inglehart's theory could not fully reflect the cultural and value transformation occurring in Northeastern China. In the case of the rise of the "Zhenghuo" contents, the content generators hold an alienized material value and there is a trend of value transformation to the post-materialist value among the audience. The dynamics between the content generators and the audience shape this cultural phenomenon together.

2. CONTENT ANALYSIS

"Zhenghuo" in Chinese initially means making a performance or doing something to make a show informally. It is mainly used in Northeastern China. Its meaning has been extended later, referring to audiences' reactions to the performers. They applaud the performers and hope that the performers could make more impressive shows. In the early 2010s, a new type of content started to go viral on Chinese internet platforms. This type of content is known as personal short homemade videos, which appeared predominantly on short-video platforms like "Kuaishou" in China and with characteristics of crudity and lowbrow. This type of content is defined as "Tuwei" content, and "Zhenghuo" content is one of the principal subcategories of it. Two characteristics distinguish the "Zhenghuo" contents from the general "Tuwei" contents. First, the general "Tuwei" contents are crude and lowbrow and create embarrassing situations that amuse certain audiences while "Zhenghuo" contents add more vital performance elements on the "Tuwei" basis, including self-humiliation, self-hurting challenge and even public disturbances. "Zhenghuo" contents show audiences embarrassment and impress the audiences with a negative perspective by performing extreme behaviors. Second, the content generators and audiences of "Tuwei" contents cover most parts of China evenly, while those of "Zhenghuo" contents are mainly from Northeastern China. The two characteristics might be caused by the unique social circumstance of Northeastern China compared to the rest of China.

The typical presentation forms of "Zhenghuo" content are short-video clips and live streaming on the online short-video platforms. The contents can be generally categorized into three typical forms: self-humiliation challenge, self-hurting challenge and public disturbance challenge. All these forms contain extreme

behaviors to attract audiences' attention and to impress them. Two examples are discussed below to uncover these typical forms.

2.1. Example I.

Title: "Shouting out 'I am a retarded cunt' in the crowds" [14]

This video is an example of self-humiliation and public disturbance challenge created by a famous "Zhenghuo" influencer with the user name Shehui ni huge in 2017. The original version was posted on "Kuaishou" and was censored later due to its violation of the community regulation. However, this short video clip was web crawled by some audiences and widely transmitted on the Chinese Internet platforms. As a result, millions of views were attracted by the reposting and recreation of this video, making it an Internet meme in China.

The length of the video clip is 13 seconds. The whole video contains only one unedited shot. The vertical composition, unstable filming and low-resolution quality show that this video was shot with a smartphone by an amateur. In the beginning, the video's title was shown on the screen using the default template provided by the "Kuaishou" platform. The title is in Chinese, which means "Shouting out 'I am a retarded cunt' in the crowds." The word "retarded cunt" in the original title is replaced by an acronym. It might be a coping to avoid community regulations of the platform. The blatant wording of the title shows a firm intention of the content generator to attract viewers' attention. The scene of the video was set in a public area. It is a street with shops on its sides. Crowds were gathered on the sides of the street in two groups. Both groups were looking at the street chess games before "Shehui ni huge" started to shout out and attract their attention. The whole scene happened at a random street in a city and matches audiences' expectation of what a random street in Northeastern China should be.

From 0:01 to 0:07 of the video, Shehui ni huge raised his hands to the sky waved both to the crowd behind him and the camera, shouting, "OK, bros, all of you look at me! Look at me! Look at me! I'm making an announcement!" He tried to attract as much attention as possible. Most of the crowd turned their heads to look at him in the video. On their faces, a common expression of confusion can be seen. While waving and shouting, Shehui ni huge showed a strong expression of careless on his outfit and body movement. His belly was exposed in the air and his facial expression did not show any embarrassment. Then at 0:08 of the video, he shouted: "I am a retarded cunt!" This strong punchline caused a significant reaction in the crowd. Almost everyone in the crowd turned his face to the performer. Some seemed surprised and confused. Some showed a facial expression of contempt. At the moment when Shehui ni huge

finished his line, a man randomly walked past between him and the camera, looking at him with a confusing face. The reaction of this man who was passing by is a strong representative of the common reaction of the crowd. After Shehui ni huge shouted out the punchline, he put his hands together in a traditional Chinese way to present his compliment to the crowd. He smiled, showed his appreciation, and apologized for disturbing others. At the same time, he said both to the camera and the crowd: "It's alright!" This last line he said in the video is a popular slang in the Northeastern Chinese language. It is usually used as an expression of being forthright. At the very end of the video, he walked out of the frame and posed a thumb up with his belly still exposed to the air.

Generally, this video is a good example of two types of "Zhenghuo" content: self-humiliation and public disturbance challenge. In this piece of content, the performer Shehui ni huge did something insane to humiliate himself to gain the audiences' attention and disturb the public order to make his show more impressive. This content showed Shehui ni huge's strong willingness to draw attention and resort to every conceivable means.

2.2. Example II.

Title: "Firing a firecracker in the mouth" [15]

Another famous "Zhenghuo" influencer did self-hurting challenge with the username Kuaishou daoge in 2017. The original version of this content was also posted on "Kuaishou." In 2019, Kuaishou daoge was banned by the "Kuaishou" platform because of his violation of the community regulation. All of the originally posted contents were removed by "Kuaishou" and all of his posted short videos were web crawled by his audiences and got reposted by them on other Internet platforms. They were widely transmitted and attracted lots of views with over a million view counts.

The length of the video clip is 14 seconds. The whole video is just like the first one. It was not edited and only contains one single shot. It was shot with a smartphone by an amateur with no stabilization and poor resolution quality. The whole video does not contain any kind of language expression. In the beginning, the title of the video was shown on the screen using the default template provided by the "Kuaishou" platform. The title was written in Chinese, which means "Firing a firecracker in the mouth."

From 0:01 to 0:04 of the video, Kuaishou daoge used a match to light a firecracker in his mouth. After he lit the firecracker, he covered his eyes with his left hand, waiting for the firecracker to explode. While he waited, his facial expression was extremely painful. At 0:04 of the video, the firecracker exploded and he covered his mouth with the hand. He then coughed hard and spat the fragment of the exploded firecracker out of his mouth.

After that, he miserably squatted down and retched violently while he raised his hand to the camera. Then the whole video clip ended stiffly.

In this example of the self-hurting type of content, Kuaishou daoge obviously knew what he was doing and the potential harm that could be caused to his body. He tried to use this extreme way to show his fearlessness and prove that he could do things that normal people cannot do. His motivation was also to attract as much attention from the audiences as possible, just like Shehui ni huge in the first example.

From the two examples discussed above, all the three types of “Zhenghuo” contents serve the same purpose – to attract more attention from the audiences, since more attention is equal to more views and more views mean more income that the content generators could get from the platform. Choosing self-humiliation challenges, self-hurting challenges and public disturbance challenges as their contents can be seen as a rational action driven by their materialist value. By Inglehart’s definition of materialist value, individuals who share the materialist value put their own material needs and physical and economic security on their priority [7]. “Zhenghuo” content generators’ extreme behaviors show that they do not care about their strive for self-actualization, stress the aesthetic and the intellectual by acting the opposite to achieve material interests. Individuals who share materialist values are usually conservative in their career choice. They are more willing to have a stable career but not the opposite. The “Zhenghuo” content generators choose not to have an ordinary career and even as content generators. They prefer the extreme way to gain views. From this perspective, the materialist value cannot be used to explain their motivations fully. The value expressed from their contents and their actions show that their value is an alienized materialist value. They consider their material needs and physical and economic security as their priority, but they refuse to choose a common or stable career. They make their contents impressive to the audiences in an extreme way, but they refuse to put effort into what common content generators focus on, such as the quality of the ideas expressed. This alienized materialist value can be seen as a cultural phenomenon caused by the sudden social transformation in Northeastern China. Inglehart uses his postmodernization theory to explain the cultural phenomenon caused by changed value; however, just like what the criticisms against his theory mentioned, the rigidity of his theory caused a lack of discussion about the dynamics and the process of the cultural and value transformation in the process of postmodernization within different contexts. In the case of Northeastern China, the gigantic politically led social transformation alienized the shift from modernization to postmodernization and shaped a unique chaotic alienized materialist value in certain groups.

3. REVIEW ANALYSIS

To discover the transformation of the values and culture of Northeastern China, an interview frame was designed focusing on interviewees’ life experiences, values and cultural life. There are four random interviewees, all from Northeastern China. The composition of the interviewees is designed to cover different age groups and social classes to represent the great majority of the population of Northeastern China. Since the contents of the interview include personal experiences, the interviewees choose to remain anonymous. Interviewees will be mentioned as Interviewees A, B, C, and D in the following discussion.

Interviewee A

Male; 24 years old; a post-graduate student at a conservatory of music; majors in traditional folk instrument performance; middle-class family background; was born and grow in Northeastern China after the reforms.

Interviewee B

Male; 51; General manager of a national owned petroleum enterprise with good education background; working-class family background; was born in Northeastern and grow in Northeastern China; has great social prestige and a well-paid job.

Interviewee C

Male; 47; engineering specialist of a national owned petroleum enterprise with a professional education background; working-class family background; was born in Northeastern China and grow in Northeastern China; has a stable occupation.

Interviewee D

Male; 62; construction worker of a national-owned enterprise with an elementary education background and a working-class family background; was born in Northeastern China before the reforms and started his career as well before the reforms as a witness experienced the impact such reforms brought to his life.

When the interviewer asked about their satisfaction with their current life status, all interviewees mentioned the improvement on a material basis. They are all satisfied with their current salary and living conditions. Interviewee C and interviewee D both expressed their concern about their social prestige, which is not as good as it used to be. However, they are still satisfied with their current life status. Interviewee A mentioned his concerns about his future career, but he also shows great determination in being a professional musician. He said, “If the northeast does not need me as a musician, I will just hit the south.”

Interviewees C and D spent their childhood in the great prosperity age of industrialized Northeastern China

and achieved their goals of having a stable career with hard work, which shows that they hold a materialist value. Their concern about their social prestige shows a rudiment of the appearing post-materialist value. The younger interviewee A shows a strong willingness to express himself on his feelings and mentioned that he would not choose a career he does not enjoy even if he might get paid more. This supported Inglehart's theory of generational replacement [5]. Individuals' values are determined by the social environment of the current experiences in their pre-adult years. Since interviewee A was born in the process of deindustrialization and postmodernization, his values have a much stronger characteristic of post-materialist compared with the older interviewees who were born at the start of modernization.

Further communication on the topic shows interviewees' opinions about their consideration of the future of the younger generations of their families. Interviewees B, C and D mentioned that they have all experienced value gaps with their children. Especially when it comes to career choices, they mentioned that their children are more willing to choose non-industrial occupations and do not consider the stability of their careers as an essential factor in choosing their careers. This is also strong proof of the value transformation occurring in Northeastern China.

According to Inglehart, in the process of postmodernization, the transformation from materialist value to post-materialist value is common and important [5] [7]. The process of modernization, the development of industrialized mass production builds a materialist social value. Characteristics of materialist value include respect of material interests, spirit of work hard, and the pursuit of stability. These characteristics show the needs of individuals living in pre-modernization and pre-industrialization societies which drive them to achieve modernization and industrialization. With the development of postmodernization and deindustrialization, individuals' lives are secured which gives them more needs on the achievement of their spiritual pursuit and self-expression values.

The interviewees were also asked about their cultural life and their content preferences. All of the interviewees mentioned that they watched "Zhenghuo" videos. They both agreed that most of these performers who created those contents were young people who suffered from unemployment and urban poverty. With deindustrialization, it gets harder for young people to find a job for living without a good educational background.

The unusual process of postmodernization with negative deindustrialization and depression on economic growth in Northeastern China brings the alienized materialist value to some of these young people. Therefore, they choose to do anything on the Internet as long as the audiences like to watch. In the views of the interviewees, these performers or "Internet celebrities"

are not vulgar clowns that the general Chinese commonly believe. On the contrary, the interviewees show their appreciation and understanding of the "Zhenghuo" content generators' performance and choice to behave.

Generally, part of the reaction of the interviewees can be seen as proof of a value transformation from materialist to post-materialist. They also accept the "Zhenghuo" culture which is a cultural phenomenon of an alienized materialist value. The reaction showed that in Northeastern China's postmodernization process, the value transformation is occurring with dynamics and diversity. The social, cultural, economic and political environment shapes this transformation together and makes it shown as a cultural phenomenon of the rise of "Zhenghuo" contents.

4. CONCLUSION

The emergence of "Zhenghuo" Internet contents in Northeastern China is a cultural phenomenon. It reflects the value transformation influenced by the postmodernization of Northeastern China. However, Inglehart's postmodernization theory could not fully cover and explain this cultural phenomenon. In his theory, the value transformation from materialist to post-materialist by intergenerational turnover is one-dimensional without considering the dynamics and diversities. In the case of the rise of "Zhenghuo" Internet contents from Northeastern China, the content generators demonstrate an alienized materialist value and the audiences formed sprouting of post-materialist value. With the generators and audience combined, the cultural phenomenon was shaped and became an essential part of the Northeastern China's postmodernization process.

This research shows that the specific form of postmodernization could be diversified and have unique characteristics within different contexts. The postmodernization theory provides a general scheme, but analysis of different societies could lead to different conclusions. This research only uses the interpretivism methodologies and the materials analyzed are also limited. Further study could conduct more quantitative or qualitative research on a broader or more specific topic scope.

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