

The Evolution of Concept of Popular Culture and Its Significance

Pengzhuo Deng

Dept. of Journalism and Communication, College of Media and International Culture, Zhe Jiang University, China

Abstract—The paper has checked the evolution of concept of popular culture, which presents the essential meanings and its hidden reasons to general readers. Built upon the conceptual evolution, i.e. roughly from British School, Frankfurt School until French School, the thesis explores the possible characteristics of today's popular culture of China in the ever-changing era. First, subjectivity of the people, i.e. the subject of China's popular culture is composed of average people; Second, aesthetic experience, i.e. China's popular culture is committed to perfecting her subjects' mind and moral sense by providing beautiful contents, but not ugly immoral ones as currently appeared on new media; Third, "cultural consciousness," i.e. the subjects should have confidence, reflection upon China's popular culture, and not reject "others" blindly.

Index Terms—popular culture, subjectivity, aesthetic experience, cultural consciousness

I. INTRODUCTION

Today, China's "the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road" initial, initialed "B&R", is going to global. So is China's culture spread over the world at the same time. Generally, we are preferred and proud of our ancient civilization and culture. But, it's not enough and impossible for us to just spread and disseminate the ancient civilization and culture over the world. Compared with our great cultural forefathers, our contemporary culture is not much more influenced and systematic as the traditional classical ones. How could we cultivate and bring about our new culture today? It's a task with emergence and significance under the circumstances of new media. Logically, we may have two sources to foster it; one is to make use of domestic sources, the other is to absorb the best from foreign culture, which has been proved to be the most effective way to strengthen and develop a new culture in history time and again. Not only should we transmit the traditional oldies but also contemporary culture to the world as well. In modern times, popular culture is well developed among other nations over the world. There is no reason for us to deny the fact. If we can have a clear mind about the trends of popular culture of other nations, China's contemporary cultural growth is bound to benefit greatly. So we are going to trace down the main trends of popular culture, and hope to get some proposals for us.

Since Matthew Arnold, one of founding fathers in popular cultural studies, set off the studies in the last few decades of the 19th century, the studies have witnessed the history of its own for over a century. Though scholars have been intensely interested in the research for such a long time, they still can't reach a final agreement on it, and hold diversified opinions, which is quite evident to indicate the complication, changeability and difficulty in grasping the essential facts of the concept. First, the difficulty is clearly shown in naming it properly. Over the past 100 years, popular culture has gotten different names. Besides the name--popular culture, it is also called populace culture in its initial stage, mass culture, industrial culture in modern society, consumption culture and media culture at present; and yet, the names, listed just a few here, can continue. From the different names mentioned above, we may notice the development of the studies and the scholars' recognition of the concept toward it. Second, for popular culture itself has too many dimensions indeed, it is hard for the scholars to understand its characteristics. During different periods, even in the same period, the scholars have held different ideas about the characteristics. Among them, they have not always shared the same opinions with each other, some opinions are similar, and others are not at all. Even the same scholar is not necessary to keep his understanding in his life time. Some of them think popular culture is lower, vulgar and rude, a kind of passive culture; others take it as equal, popular, practical and radical, an active culture. Ideologically speaking, some look it as a representation of dominating ideology, but for others, it is an ideology embodying the average people; and some consider it is made of the popular subjects; others regard it as media culture. The diversified ideas of popular culture, picked up and listed here, are the point of departure for us to explore it. Based upon it, the thesis mainly consists of two sections: one is to revisit and renew the evolution of the concept, put forward by different scholars concerned with it; another part, it includes a brief discussion on today's popular culture in China, whose sources are partially derived from the evolution.

II. THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF POPULAR CULTURE

A. *British School*

As we know that popular culture is a kind of historical product and phenomenon rather than natural one. It is clearly

denoted that popular culture is not born naturally, spontaneously in the process and development of human society, but at some specific and special time. When popular culture is mentioned in cultural studies, scholars are intent to trace back to the great giant, herald, pioneer, Matthew Arnold in the studies in Britain. In his eyes, culture is the best thought, knowledge and speech of human being ever since the time immemorial (Arnold, 2008, p.18). In Matthew Arnold's era, the majorities of average people are poor and is not available to school education, so they can't read and write appropriately. And Arnold holds the view that the populace is illiterate, low and rude, and they have no cultural cultivation; in his eyes, so is the culture of the populace. Because of the lower culture, their speech or manner is not civil as well. That's why Arnold has named it as culture of populace. In the time, because of his great influence, there are conflicts between the populace culture and the elitist one throughout Great Britain. Even there is a potential threat—anarchy—to existing government from the lower populace for their barbarism. The attitude toward the populace culture is inherited by F.R. Leavis. To him, the traditional classical culture of Britain is divided into the elite culture and mass civilization by Industrial Revolution. Here, the so-called mass civilization refers to mass culture, according to F.R. Leavis, which is commercialized, lower, and coarse. And it is consumed and accepted by the uneducated mass, without criticism (Zhu, 2009, p.438). Film, broadcasting, popular fiction and publication, and advertisement, etc., are listed in the ranks of mass culture. F. R. Leavis also maintains that mass culture is banal, standard, snobbish, paralyzing and poisoning the mass, which is caused by the industrialization in Great Britain. For his life-long devotion to the studies, he is regarded as a pioneer and leader of Leavis School among cultural academicians. In his works, there are worries and concerns about the mass culture hidden beneath his lines. From Arnold to Leavis, they have shared some beliefs on the mass culture. Broadly speaking, they are a kind of elitism. The outstanding disciples, who have inherited the elitism, are Richard Hoggart, Edward Thompson, Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams. But, in fact, they all are not always faithful to Arnoldian tradition in the end. They have their own theory on popular culture. For instance, Hoggart holds that popular culture is popularized and spread by average workers, which doesn't mean it is an escape to daily life. On the contrary, the life world of working class is full of colors and tastes of their own, not dull and drab at all. From Hoggart, who thinks highly of working class, we can see his idea of popular culture is diverged from his teachers, F. R. Leavis, who actually have contempt to average people. That is to say, to popular culture, Hoggart is commendatory, Arnold and Leavis are derogatory. The other renowned disciple, Raymond Williams, also, insists that popular culture is the daily life and experience of average men and women, instead of the so-called traditional classics, which is also a react against the elitists, like Leavis School. Though the scholars are far different from the opinions about popular culture, they have contributed their wisdom to the cultural studies, and are called British School as well as Birmingham School, who have set up the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University, initialed as CCCS.

B. Frankfurt School

It is understandable for general readers about British School, there are more differences than similarities on issues related. For whatever, from Arnold down F. R. Leavis to Raymond Williams, a representative of Birmingham School, there is huge span of time gap. And the situation and context in different stages of history are totally different and diversified contrasted against the precedent ones. In fact, even within a same school in a similar time, the scholars are most likely to have distinctive voices of their own. So are the ideas on popular culture from Frankfurt School, for the studies center of the School is located in Frankfurt, Germany. Generally speaking, the School is referred as a School of criticism, or negation against the contemporary industrialized society. As to the criticism against capitalism, they are unanimously agreed to uncover the dark sides of capitalism. Nevertheless, when it comes to popular culture, there are not concerted voices among them; some are singing their own songs, and others are just contrastive and contradictory. And more importantly, the theory of popular culture is an indispensable part of the School, which is hard to be neglected by the scholars related.

In the last 1930s, Frankfurt School, who had been devoted to the studies of the influence of popular culture and media upon ideology and society, has coined a new term—"cultural industry" (Lu & Wang, 2009, p.89), which is quickly accepted by academic circle, and is referred to both the process of cultural industrialization of mass production and the commercial system promoted by the process. To the members of Frankfurt School, popular culture is not derived from the spontaneous rise of the culture of ordinary mass, the dominated class, but a specific culture which is popularized among the mass by making the use of popular media, like radio, loudspeaker, film, and gramophone etc, a kind of modern devices, invented in last 1920s or 1930s. They consider it as a hotchpotch, a mixture of all kinds of cultural forms, which is imposed upon the mass from the upper ruling class. Here, we can see the distinction between the School and other scholars. To Frankfurt, the so-called popular culture is not a culture of average people, but one culture whose vehicles are popular media, the tools and devices to spread any culture; what's more, they are available to the mass easily and directly. Hence, to Frankfurt scholars, the studies of popular culture are mainly focused on media devices as well as its content and form. However, to general readers, popular culture first means the content is easy and simple, and then, the mass is the subject of the culture. As we mentioned above, the Frankfurt is united harmoniously to criticize and make the anatomy of modern capitalist society, but they are far from the same with each other on popular culture. Among their arguments, there are roughly three varied ideas on popular culture though they have agreements on exposing capitalism. A first group of the idea is led by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, a second one is noted for Benjamin Walter, an optimist to popular culture, a third one is represented by Herbert Marcuse, who is famous for so-called single dimensional culture.

During 1930s~1940s, as it is known to us that, Frankfurt School, for their Jewish identity, for which was persecuted by German Nazi, was forced to exile in the U.S.A. Afterwards, the School, headed by Horkheimer and Adorno, have reconsidered the widespread persecution in Germany, and reflected upon why German Nazi ideology has been popularized and predominated over the common people, and finally reached a remark that popular psychology was the devil to play an utmost role in the Holocaust. The people's psychology is affected and controlled by the contemporary ideology of German authority, which had also dictated the national cultural industry. Of course, Horkheimer and Adorno have noticed that there are connections between the mass culture or cultural industry and the ideology. They have witnessed and experienced the ideological propaganda adopted by German fascist governments, who made clever use of the popular Medias, like broadcasting loudspeaker, newspaper, radio etc, and the use of the new scientific transportation, like automobile, train and ship to carry millions of Jews systematically to Auschwitz Camp and Buchenwald Camp, which are referred to as modern "factory" described in the Medias controlled by German authority to deceive the Jews, and be handled--murdered. At that time, even there are a lot of Jews to be deceived, for who are willing to help mobilize their fellow Jews to follow German Nazis. Apparently, to us modern citizens, all the actions are barbarism, but why are so many people set in the Nazi trap without knowing it? According to Frankfurt School, why the trap is made successfully in the public, it is because the Nazi made use of the popular media, modern transportation and the like modern tools to dupe the Jews; and at the time the average people have naturally accepted the idea that science is too innocent and good to kill them, so that they would collaborate with the fascists. So, in a sense, the average people have a belief that modernity is always progressive and beautiful. And German authority just takes the advantage of the innocent belief in cultural industry. Actually, all the cultural products are embodiments of the German Nazi ideology. Therefore, to Adorno and Horkheimer, cultural industry, i.e. popular culture, is not formed and organized spontaneously by mass people, "the lower class", but the representation or reproduction of dominating ideology from "the upper". After Frankfurt School was moved to America, they continued to observe and criticize American society. They think that America is a society, characterized by consumption and pleasure-seeking. In America, culture industry is one of profitable industries, which is a system of pleasure industry to massively duplicate, propagate cultural products or goods. Or, frankly speaking, popular culture is consumed like any other goods in markets; it is both a consumption culture and culture of hedonism. In short, from the viewpoint of Adorno and Horkheimer, popular culture is uniform, standard, commercial, pleasure-seeking, ingratiating, false, mandatory, etc, in content; and in terms of person, they are slack, passive, atomic, isolated and something like that.

Yet, there is a kind of distinctive opinion in the School, represented by Walter Benjamin, from Adorno and Horkheimer. Benjamin is not always negative to the popular media. He holds that, as science and technology are developing rapidly; the means and methods of production of art surely will take great changes and be upgraded, so is the forms of art to be changed, which will bring about new types of art. And a second idea taken by Benjamin is, since the production of human society is in a new era of mechanical duplication, so is the production of art, so can art be reproduced and duplicated as well, if not absolutely, theoretically speaking at least. But the modern technology of duplication, like photograph, cinema, etc, is far from the same as the traditional craftsmanship of duplication, like xylography, lithographic printing. The new copy technology can bring the imitation of art upward to a fresh realm, which is impossible to reach for the original product of art, taking camera as a good example, which can offer viewers life-like scene and highly defined colors, which are also impossible to distinguish for naked eyes. However, the aura of traditional art is disappeared and replaced by the mechanical copy of art. A third one, which Benjamin is distinctive about popular culture, is that he has strong faith in the subjects of popular culture. He doesn't think all the people are numb and insensitive in mind, some parts of them, being politically progressive, can be organized to be revolutionists to overthrow the capitalists. What's more, he doesn't agree on the idea, i.e. popular culture and elitist culture are not necessarily conflicted and contradicted as Horkheimer and Adorno have claimed. In Benjamin's opinion, popular culture is not rude and uncultivated.

A third part of distinctive idea of popular culture is Herbert Marcuse, whose ideas are recorded in his work *One Dimensional Man—Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. In the book, he has formulated that popular culture is one dimensional, and the subjects of the culture are one dimensional too. Marcuse (1991) refers American society as post-industrialized society, which is predominated by hedonism and consumptionism. Because of abundant materials and goods in the society, most of the citizens are set free of starvation and coldness in America. It is the rich living condition that has led the conflicts and contradictions between working class and capitalist to be cleared up, the workers' class consciousness to be eliminated, turned the workers into soulless ones. Simply and frankly, he is warning us that working class will not overthrow their capitalist class anymore, who used to take it as their ultimate goal. And as a result of the eradication of class conflicts, there is only one ideology existed in the industrialized society—the dominating ideology of capitalist, which is criticized as one dimensional society. And it just brings up the one dimensional culture. Another key point in the book is a discussion on popular culture and the elitist culture. Marcuse admits that, still there are difference and division between popular culture and elitist culture in industrial society, however, in post-industrial one, elitist culture isn't degenerated downward to popular culture, in Marcuse's opinions, which refers to golden oldies, traditional classics, and is not well suited the context of the post-industrial society, and is rejected by the context. Before the industrial society, the elitist culture, though enjoyed and appreciated by few minorities of the society, at least, has two dimensions, including conflicts, negation and criticism against the existing

commercial order; in post-industrial society, for science and technology are rapidly improved, one good way brought by that is the majority of proletarian, who are set free from the hard labor and stricken poverty in the past, the other way is the popular media invented rapidly, which are available to average people to enjoy art and culture. While the people are enjoying using the new media, the ruling ideology is permeated easily into every domain of their daily life, either public or private domain. Though this culture has various forms, the essence of the content is the representation of national ideology, which controls, crumbles and corrupts people's mind; and the workers and the management seem to be no more hostile each other. Seeing the tactic government against the working class planned carefully by the capitalist, whether Herbert Marcuse refers it as "totalitarian" dictatorship, or in Antonio Gramsci's term, who is an Italian Marxist, as "hegemony" of government (Leitch, Cain, Finke, et al.(ed.), 2001, p.1135-1138); they merely hit the essence of the culture. Above all, borrowing Marcuse's remarks (1991), the society is one dimensional, so is popular culture fostered in the society; that is to say, there is merely one culture from the upper ruling class. Marcuse maintains that it is the culture that turns the average people into the single dimensional, just like an isolated atom, which are deprived of rebellious desire and negative ability.

C. *French School*

French School, generally, is referred to a group of thinkers on culture in France, like Jean-Francois Lyotard, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, to name just a few here. They are also called as post-modernists. Of course, there are other post-modernist theoreticians in other countries, like Frederica Jameson in America, Terry Eagleton in Britain. But, here, the thesis is merely going to centre on Jean Baudrillard, for whose theory on mass media is predictive and logically more connected with the gist discussed in the thesis. Baudrillard began to pay his attention to popular culture in last 1960s. He points out that culture has been commercialized, which means two aspects, one is that culture can be exchanged and circulated like any other commodities, a second one is the real value of culture is lost but the value of exchange remained. To modern media, Baudrillard believes that it is a pusher or promoter to accelerate the degeneration from modern society of production downwards to post-modernist society of simulacrum. In post-modernist society, everyone can see implosion, high culture and low culture, phenomenon and reality, traditional kind of dual oppositions cleared up here and there. (John, 2004, p.152~153) Modern media is woven into the webs of carriers, which have made information into the webs of contents; and the simulacrum and information are huge enough to cover up the sky, which gets formed a super-reality beyond the reality. And it is hard for general readers to distinguish the reality from its representation or vice versa. Apparently, the modern media seem to be neutral to present viewers the reality, but "conceal and cover" the true story of the reality in fact, which eradicates the meaning and truth. And a new type of inequality is established again between the people and popular media. The people, faced with great number of information, might have many choices, but the true story is that, the people have no communication or dialogue with the media only to accept the information released by the media. Either this one or that one are you made to choose. So, the people have to select and accept what they are confronted. In brief, the people of popular culture are passive; somehow, the media vehicle is an evil-doer; the content is full of lies.

D. *Popular Culture and Folk Culture*

General readers might be confused with the two concepts of popular culture and folk culture respectively, for both the two share something in common and vary greatly in many ways. Folk culture derives from the average people, so-called "the below", "the lower party", is made by the people themselves to represent their life and experiences, which agrees with the ideas from Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams. It is not imposed upon the people from the above, not the kind of dominate ideology, but "a public domain" of the people, for the people and by the people, has least connection with the elitist culture. This point is far away from Frankfurt School. And folk culture is intent to focus on their traditional materials, really democratic if defined by its participants; and popular culture is keen on present situation, seeking for a kind of real democracy all the time. To some extent, the two are overlapped.

E. *Summary of the Evolution of Popular Culture*

From the analysis and synthesis of the conceptual evolution of popular culture, a clear map is shown here. Arnold and F.R. Leavis, who belong to the elitists, don't think highly of popular culture. This can be explained from the context Arnold lives in British history, a transitional era from traditional to industrial one. Being an aristocrat, he has good grounds to maintain the high and noble tradition and culture to stabilize the society. Moreover, at that time, many of the common people are illiterate and uncultivated, so they are rude and anarchists. Anarchism is the last condition Arnold can bear. The arisen contempt is a kind of defense of the existing order. As to F.R. Leavis, a professor of Cambridge University, one of the elitist intellectuals as well, witnesses the decline of British power after two World Wars. And Britain is earnest to need peace to repair the scars left by the Wars, he doesn't want to see violence and ferocity, i.e. anarchism. And he has inherited the essential part from Arnold, and certainly is bound to defend the elitism as well. Conversely, Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, as outstanding disciples of Leavis School, try to praise popular culture because they are born in a family of working class; they understand their daily life of workers and defend the culture from the working class, whose ideas are dynamic and progressive.

Though Adorno and Horkheimer criticize popular culture sharply, they are mere critics, theoretically and spiritually, but not practically; Benjamin is taking a technological intent, which proves he is dialectic on one hand, and supportive

to modern media on another hand. Pitiably, he is somewhat neglected the spirituality, creativity and uniqueness of culture. For Marcuse, he is attacking bitterly against the mass culture too, and so is his attack launched like Adorno and Horkheimer, is not radical and revolutionary, but ideological. That is why his theory sounds like a “Utopia”. Up to now, inevitably, we will ask why Frankfurt School has been waging theoretical struggles instead of an uprising against the ruling institution. Because they claim that their responsibility is to criticize the industrial society of capitalism, and to awaken working class not to forget their mission to overthrow the ruling capitalist, which has brought them the reputation of Western Marxists. Yet, the situation and the time are changed, it is impossible for the working class to overturn capitalism by arms. Therefore, the School insists to negating the existing system by launching ideological, theoretical attack, which is just a war of words, not practical revolt. And so is their criticism to popular culture.

Jean Baudrillard, forewarning of the negative influence of popular media before the media were globalized and Internet was popularized, and is recognized as a prophet of media culture. He has remarked, modern media is a threat to accelerate alienated soul, to dismember a country and individual mentality and personality. Obviously, what Baudrillard predicted is to awaken the world to be alert to the disadvantage and danger to destroy the nations and individuals. His foresights are mainly benefitted from Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jurgen Habermas, a German philosopher, whose theory have drawn Baudrillard’s focus on modern information and media. This is why he is capable of forewarning of the harmful influence, and criticizing the media for it.

III. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EVOLUTION

The evolution of the concept of popular culture is of great importance and significance to the cultural growth in China today. We may make use of the advantage of popular culture to improve and mend the deficiency of today’s culture in China. It is known to us that China is making progress in transitional phase. Our cultural progress made is lagged behind the economy in China, though it has long history of civilization for over 5,000 years. We are not strong and powerful in contemporary culture. Nowadays, with the globalization of information and economy, for us, it is the best time to absorb the best culture from the world, but also it’s the worst time to have more “negative” cultures, as Baudrillard addressed. There are too many trends for youngsters to resist and pick up the information correctly from webs of Internet. So, if we think about Baudrillard’s sharp remarks, especially about the negative sides of Internet, we can’t help worrying about the children in China today. The thrilling cry of “saving children” seems to echo around us again. It is critical for schools and the like organization, institution to take measures against the negative effects. As to popular culture, surely, neither can we follow Frankfurt School nor British School. Because the former stresses too much on the vehicles of culture, and not practical; and the later, they pays much attention to the division and conflict of culture. We should have new features of our own in cultural construction, faced the new situation—globalized Internets. Taking the best from the both, we have following proposals to develop our new type of culture. First, subjectivity, it means the people should play the role of subject, not by the elitist minority. The new culture in China today is derived from the so-called “lower” side, mainly created by them, not by and from the upper one, the ruling elitists; second, the best aesthetic experience, this is stressed that our popular culture is devoted to good and beautiful experience for the people, not the “ugly and dirty” one on some Internet, which is vulgar and low, harmful to youngsters. This is to ensure the culture to serve the final ends to entertain the subject of the people mentally and physically, and to help them form healthy personality. In short, here what we try to avoid is the destructive sides of Internet culture. Third, “Cultural consciousness”, it refers to we are supposed to have cultural confidence of our own, but not blindly reject “others” at the same time, on other hand, we must rethink and reflect upon the content, type, form, carrier, receptor of the culture from time to time, to develop and create something new. We are certain to fully make use of folk culture, old and new, home and abroad, in a critical manner. After all, not only will China’s culture provide spiritual bread for Chinese people, but also should contribute to the cultural treasury of the world, that is, the new culture is definitely universal.

REFERENCES

- [1] Arnold, Matthew. (2008). *Culture and Anarchy*. Han, Minzhong (Trans.). Peking: Shenghuo- Dushu-Xinzhhi (SDX for short) Joint Publishing Company.
- [2] Leitch, Vincent B. & William E. Cain, Laurie Finke, Barbara Johnson, John McGowan, Jeffery J. Williams. (2001). *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company.
- [3] Lu, Yang & Wang, Yang. (2009). *Cultural Studies: An Introduction*. Shanghai: Fudan University Press.
- [4] Marcuse, Herbert. (1991). *One Dimensional Man—Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- [5] Storey, John. (2004). *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. Peking: Peking University Press.
- [6] Zhu, Liyuan. (ed.). (2009). *Western Contemporary Literary Theory*. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press.

Pengzhuo Deng, born in Yiyang City of Hunan Province of China in 1996, currently, is a student in Dept. of Journalism and Communication, College of Media and International Culture, Zhe Jiang University. She is a writer of essays and poems with prizes. Her academic interests include writing essays, journalism report, and stories.