From Stage Carnival to Algorithmic Heroism: A Tri-Generational Analysis of Chinese Youth Values through Popular Music

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Abstract: *This study outlines the trajectory of Chinese youth's values from collective dependence to algorithmic collective heroism through a cross-generational textual analysis. against the backdrop of Chinese pursuit of modernization, the rise of digital capitalism and the commodification of cultural production have led three generations to construct different symbolic systems: the 1990s generation first characterized resistant collectivism as "reveling on the stage"; the 2000s generation represented resilient dialectics as "walking in the rain"; and the 2010s generation reconstructed algorithmic heroism in the face of algorithmic colonization. This evolution is not only a projection of Chinese sociopolitical changes but also an enlightening framework for understanding the formation of generational values in hypermodern society.*

Keywords: Want to Sing and Sing, Keep Walking, Lonely Warrior, Intergenerational values, Youth.

1. Introduction

In the context of rapid social transformation in contemporary China, the evolution of generational values has become a key perspective for understanding the cultural identity and social mentality of young people. Pop music, as the core carrier of mass culture, not only reflects the spiritual landscape of a specific era but also shapes the cognitive paradigm of youth regarding self, struggle, and collective relationships through lyric texts, symbolic metaphors, and audience interactions. From the song *Want to sing and sing* (《想唱就唱》) popular among the post-1990s generation to the *Keep Walking* (《淋雨一直走》) admired by the post-2000s generation, and the phenomenal song *Lonely Warrior* (《孤勇者》) for the post-2010s generation, these three musical works spanning two decades reveal the narrative shift in Chinese youth's values from "collectivist dependency" to "individual resilience" and finally to "algorithmic collective heroism" under the multiple forces of rapid economic growth, digital technology revolution, and policy regulation.

The post-1990s generation is referred to as the Millennials. In an era of economic openness and the rise of the internet, their theme song *Want to sing and sing* was constructed through the narrative logic of "grassroots democratization" in the 2004 TV talent show *Super Girl* (《超级女声》). The lyrics "Want to sing and sing, I should sing loudly. Even if no one applauds for me, at least I can still appreciate myself courageously. Want to sing and sing, I should sing beautifully. Even if this stage is empty, I will eventually see waving glow sticks" highlight the budding of individual expression and convey the value orientation that self-identity precedes external evaluation. This value emphasizes the importance of individual independence and self-worth in society, reflecting the Millennials' values of breaking through traditional frameworks and bravely pursuing themselves. The post-2000s generation is known as Generation Z. In an environment deepened by the digital revolution and material abundance, through the metaphorical system in *Keep Walking* - "Walking in the rain, when there's sunlight, it should be warm" - they depict the unique spiritual characteristics of Generation Z when facing real-life challenges. Unlike the confrontational thinking of "overcoming the storm" in traditional narratives of struggle, the lyrics, with the continuous action of "keep walking", reframe the pressure of exam education as a field for cultivating psychological resilience, revealing the cognitive transformation of Generation Z towards adversity. The post-2010s are called Generation Alpha, and they are digital natives. They rely on the "decentralized heroism" narrative in *Lonely Warrior* - "Love you walking alone in dark alleys, love your non-submissive posture, love you confronting despair without shedding a tear, love your tattered clothes but daring to challenge fate, love how you and I are so similar, our wounds are the same." The juxtaposition of "tattered clothes" and "daring to challenge fate" forms a paradoxical coexistence of material hardship and spiritual resistance, transforming the anxiety of grassroots youth into a symbolic strategy against difficulties.

The three generations of youth all face the tension between self-actualization and societal expectations, but their coping strategies have shown significant generational evolution: those born in the 1990s seek individuality within collectivism, those born in the 2000s reconstruct autonomy through narratives of resilience, and those born in the 2010s reshape the collective hero imagery with the aid of technology. This evolutionary trajectory resonates precisely with Chinese transformation from a developmental state based on collectivism to an innovative global powerhouse, reflecting the creative integration of traditional pragmatism and global values.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Current Status of Cultural Sociology and Research on Youth Values

In the field of cultural sociology, the study of youth culture has gradually become an important direction. Yan Cuijuan (2019) studied the uniqueness and similarity of youth

subcultures formed in social changes [1]. Chen Saijin (2023) found that in the past three decades, Chinese online youth subculture has undergone several development stages such as critism, romanticism, sentimentalism, and nationalism. The formation of these cultural phenomena is closely related to the interactive relationship between the state, market, and individuals [2]. Huang Ruiling (2022) believes that with the "cultural turn" of social science, cultural sociology has become an important paradigm for studying social phenomena, especially in the study of youth subcultures. Youth subcultures show the characteristics of diversity and mobility, satisfying the pursuit of individuality and self-actualization of youth, and challenging mainstream culture to a certain extent [3]. Tian Fei (2010) believes that under the influence of technology media and consumer culture, youth subculture has formed a confrontation with mainstream culture, and popular music, as an important expression, has become an important breakthrough in the study of youth culture [4]. Anthony Y.H. Fung (2009) explored the significant transformation of Chinese youth culture, believing that the liberalization values expressed by youth in consumer culture may have far-reaching social and political impacts [5]. In the context of globalization, the collision and integration of different cultures make popular music a manifestation of cultural conflict between generations. Jia Li (2008) believes that the choice and acceptance of popular music by post-1990s, post-2000s, and post-2010s reflect their attitude differences towards traditional and modern culture [6]. This phenomenon also reflects the exploration of cultural integration and conflict in cultural sociology, deepening the understanding of generational values [7].

The of intergenerational values has a close relationship with popular music. Popular music not only reflects the values of young people but also plays a significant role in shaping and disseminating these values. In recent years, interdisciplinary research on popular music and youth culture has continuously deepened, especially on how popular music reflects and influences youth subcultures. As Jeroen de Kloet (2005) mentioned, popular music demonstrates diversity and complexity against the backdrop of cultural globalization, providing new perspectives and insights for future research [8].

2.2 The Relationship between the Changes in Values among Chinese Youth and Popular Music

The change in values across generations is an important social phenomenon, especially in the context of rapidly developing societies where the values of young people gradually form and influence the cultural direction of the entire society. Pop music, as an important cultural form, is not only the main carrier of youth culture, but also plays a key role in the changes in generational values. Liao Xiaoping and Zhang Changming (2007) believe that after 1978, the values of Chinese society have experienced significant generational changes, manifested as a process from differentiation to collision, and then to dynamic integration [9]. Pop music not only reflects the values of contemporary youth but also serves as an important medium for their formation and dissemination [10].

The content and style of popular music constantly evolve with social changes and the needs of the younger generation, reflecting the cultural differences and value changes between different generations. Jiang Zhendong (2016) believes that the conflict and integration between youth subculture and mainstream culture are increasingly closely related to popular music, which shows diversity in values [11]. Post-1990s representative songs like *A Little Happiness* (《小幸运》) emphasize personal emotions and nostalgia for youth, and the pursuit of simple happiness in the lyrics reflects this generation's confusion and self-searching process during social transformation. Studies have shown that post-1990s are more inclined to post-materialism, showing less emphasis on money and more attention to self-realization and emotional expression [4] [10]. Shao Lei (2012) believes that youth subculture challenges dominant culture through stylization and alternative symbols, making popular music an important carrier of young people's resistance, conflict, and identity recognition. The impact of new media on youth subculture cannot be ignored, as it has opened up new avenues for young people's identity recognition and cultural expression [12]. Post-2000s representative songs like *Lonely Warrior* emphasize the fighting spirit and collective consciousness, reflecting this generation's resilience and courage when facing social pressure. The strong fighting spirit and identification with social responsibility in post-2000s' values have become the core theme of their music works [13]. Jeroen de Kloet (2005) analyzed the revival of Chinese rock culture, emphasizing how young people express their identity and emotions through music under the background of globalization and marketization [8]. Post-2010s representative songs incorporate more elements of internet culture. This generation has grown up in the digital age, and the content of their songs often expresses their views on friendship and life through humorous and relaxed methods, reflecting their emphasis on social relations and exploration of self-identity. The diversity and fragmentation of this generation's values are fully reflected in their music, showing a more open and inclusive attitude. Yao Wenhan (2023) believes that the popularity of *Lonely Warrior* has not only triggered a collective activity of emotional expression but also showcased the traffic carnival of short video platform creators and their impact on the educational function of young people [14]. Liu Xingchen (2024) discussed the evolution of *Lonely Warrior* discourse in popular music, revealing how this discourse has become a symbol of mainstream ideology and how different power structures affect the shaping and control of cultural narratives [15]. Rhee (2020) explored the role of Korean popular music in youth culture, emphasizing how music shapes young people's identity against the backdrop of political and social change [16]. Xu Zaiyang (2025) conducted a literature review of music development among Chinese adolescents, emphasizing the significance of music educators in multicultural music teaching environments. This provides theoretical support for further research on the role of music in the formation of values in young people [17].

Pop music, as an important cultural phenomenon, plays an indispensable role in the study of generational value changes. Existing research results in the academic field show that the values between generations not only have significant differences in content, but also exhibit unique characteristics

in expression forms and cultural backgrounds, providing a theoretical basis for this study.

3. Case Studies

3.1 Based on the Analysis of the Theme *Song Want to sing and sing* of the Millennials

Want to sing and sing is the theme song of the 2005 Hunan TV talent show *Super Girl*. *Super Girl* was the first landmark talent show for mass singers in Chinese mainland. The show was open to female registrations nationwide, emphasizing "authentic presentation" and "nationwide interaction". Through innovative formats such as regional selections, comeback mechanisms, and text voting, it established a complete competition system from auditions to the annual finale. It breaks traditional constraints on age, appearance, and singing methods, giving ordinary people the chance to realize their dreams through the stage. The concept of "want to sing and sing" has been put into practice through designs such as public voting and remote interaction, promoting the audience to shift from passive viewing to active participation, creating a cultural phenomenon where "grassroots idols" are deeply bound with their fans. *Want to sing and sing* serves as the brand essence of *Super Girl*, being both the name of its theme song and the core carrier of the show's spirit.

3.1.1 Textual Analysis of *Want to sing and sing*

Want to sing and sing serves as a significant text in the early 21st-century Chinese youth culture. Through the construction of imagery groups and emotional coding systems in its lyrics, it profoundly reflects the spiritual transformation of the youthful demographic during a period of social transition, as they break through constraints and reconstruct their subjectivity. Viewed from the perspective of Foucault's "disciplinary society" theory, motifs in the lyrics such as "pushing open the night skylight" and "approaching the sun" essentially constitute a symbolic resistance to standardized life trajectories.

In the dimension of self-construction, the repeated aria in the chorus, "want to sing and sing, I should sing loudly, even if no one applauds for me", forms a "double voice" in Bakhtin Michael's Carnival Theory. The tension between the overt semantic posture and the deep-structured loneliness is just like what Anthony Giddens said about the difficulty of establishing "pure relationships" in the context of modernity: young people both desire to break free from the constraints of collectivism and find it hard to completely escape the psychological dependence on group identity. This contradiction is particularly prominent in the juxtaposition of "self-admiration" and "fluorescent stick" imagery, the former pointing to the intrinsic motivation in Deci Edward L.'s Self-Determination Theory, while the latter implies the struggle for symbolic power in Pierre Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory—where the stage is elevated from a physical space to a field for the reproduction of cultural capital. The inter-domain metaphor of "dreams being magical nutrition" in the lyrics reflects the subject-building mechanism in Jacques Lacan's Mirror Theory. When individuals objectify dreams as nurturing entities, they are actually temporarily escaping the discipline of the symbolic realm through the imaginary realm.

During the transitional period when traditional value systems are loosening and new cultures are not yet fully established, young people integrate themselves during the psychosocial moratorium by concretizing dreams as operational growth momentum. The sense of time pressure in the lyric "urging me to open up" reflects the existential anxiety in Zygmunt Bauman's theory of Liquid Modernity — in an accelerated social context, young people must constantly prove their subjective value to combat existential voidness.

From the perspective of cultural dissemination, the success of this work stems from accurately grasping the core essence of The Birmingham School's youth subculture theory. The lyrics deliberately weaken specific narratives and strengthen emotional symbols; this renders the text an "open text" that allows youth from different classes to project their own experiences into it. This creative strategy allows the song to carry the specific context of talent show culture, while also transcending the specific historical situation to become a storage device for intergenerational memory. When new generation groups like TFBOYS cover this song, they essentially complete the intergenerational transmission of cultural memory, confirming the transformation mechanism from "storage memory" to "functional memory" in Jan Assmann's Cultural Memory Theory.

At the level of spatial politics, the repeated presentation of the "stage" image constitutes a vivid representation of Henri Lefebvre's Spatial Production Theory. The physical stage, as a "third space", both produces young people's resistance practices to mainstream culture and is incorporated by capital forces as a commercial performance venue. The diachronic dissemination effect of this work, compared to the suppressed expression of "humming quietly" in I Want to Sing performed by Su Hong in the 1980s, *Want to sing and sing* marks a fundamental transformation in the emotional structure of a generation: from collective emotional restraint to individual-centered passion release. This transformation is both benefited from the cognitive upgrade brought by the popularization of higher education and also originates from the equalized expression created by information technology empowerment. When the lyric "love gives me energy" is sublimated into a declaration of the times, it actually completes the value leap from private emotion to public rationality, marking that the youth group is striving for differentiated social recognition through cultural practice.

In the semiotic dimension, the sublimation process of "fluorescent sticks" from concrete objects to cultural symbols perfectly demonstrates the evolutionary logic of Charles Sanders Santiago Peirce's Triadic Sign Relation. As an indexical sign, the fluorescent stick initially only pointed to the concert scene; when it was sublimated into a symbolic sign, it carried the deep implications of the construction of youth subculture communities. This proliferation of semiotic meaning confirms Ernst Cassirer's essential assertion that "humans are semiotic animals" — youth accomplish spiritual redemption against material alienation through semiotic reconstruction. The fission dissemination of lyric texts in the internet era realizes the "hyperreality" construction in Jean Baudrillard's simulacra theory: when countless individuals repeat "want to sing and sing" in digital space, virtual identification has surpassed physical experience to become

the new reality.

The cultural value of *Want to sing and sing* lies in its precise capture of the collective psychological folds during the period of social transformation. In the context where risk society and opportunity society coexist, the lyrics retain both the individual struggle narrative advocated by neoliberalism and implicit criticism of excessive individualization. This tension structure makes the text a prism for observing the modernity experience of Chinese youth—in the gap between the disintegration of traditional community bonds and the yet-to-be-formed new communities, young people practice what Anthony Giddens calls Life-politics through the creative interpretation of musical texts, that is, reconstructing the meaningful connection between the self and the world at the micro level. Although this cultural practice has transitional characteristics, it provides a key path for understanding the spiritual spectrum of contemporary Chinese youth.

3.1.2 Functional Analysis of *Want to sing and sing*

In the historical context of Chinese dual social transformation at the beginning of the 21st century, the mechanism of *Want to sing and sing* as a youth culture symbol is essentially the product of the mutual construction of social structure tension, technological revolution, and generational value transformation.

Want to sing and sing represents the reconstruction of value coordinates under compressed modernity. After Chinese accession to the WTO, the impacts of globalization and the deepening of marketization gave rise to a unique "compressed modernity" dilemma. The expansion of higher education, coupled with the contraction of the job market, led to a paradox of depreciation in human capital. Between 1999 and 2005, the enrollment size of higher education in China increased by 165%. However, at the same time, the employment rate of college graduates showed a significant decline. Before 1996, the initial employment rate of college graduates had always been stable at 100%, but starting from 1997, it experienced a "cliff-like" drop, and in the subsequent years, it showed a fluctuating downward trend [18]. The rigid constraints of the household registration system combined with the soaring price-to-income ratio created spatial exclusion. From 2000 to 2004, the average housing price in Beijing increased by 0.78% [19]. From the 1990s to the early 21st century was a phase when state-owned enterprises aimed at transforming their operating mechanisms and establishing modern enterprise systems. From 1992 to 2002, state-owned enterprises entered a rapid disintegration phase, and after 2003, they entered a deep disintegration phase [20]. The disintegration of the unit system forced individuals to face directly the "risk society" pointed out by Beck [21]. This overlapping of multiple negative cycles has plunged the youth into a crisis of material security threshold in Inglehart's theory. When the basic survival pressure breaks through the intergenerational transfer capability, the post-materialistic demands for self-actualization are forced to coexist with survival anxiety. The metaphor of "dreams being magical nutrition" in *Want to sing and sing* reconstructs the meaning production system of the "social generation" by extracting individual value from work.

Secondly, *Want to sing and sing* is a practice of participatory democracy under technological empowerment. The number of Internet users in China rose from 22.5 million in 2000 to 111 million in 2005, the number of Internet-connected computers increased from 8.92 million in 2000 to 49.5 million in 2005, and the international bandwidth of the Internet grew from 2799M in 2000 to 136,106M in 2005. The Internet has restructured the field of youth cultural production. The online community in the era of internet bars and the text messaging voting of *Super Girl* formed a technological democratization that achieved "quasi-political participation" through media marketization. This empowerment mechanism forms a technological utopian intertext with the lyrics "Give me a pair of wings", allowing atomized individuals to complete "participatory resistance" within the virtual community.

Thirdly, *Want to sing and sing* is a resilient struggle in the intergenerational value rift. Compared to the metaphysical pursuit of the "the discussion of PanXiao" in Chinese 1980s, the Millennials face the devaluation of academic credentials and the existential void of "slow employment". Against this backdrop, the "brave" manifesto of *Want to sing and sing* has developed a dual resistance strategy: on the surface, it achieves mainstream discourse negotiation through the democratization of talent shows, while at a deeper level, it cultivates a defensive value system of "self-appreciation". This cultural strategy presents the "fresh contact" characteristic mentioned by Karl Mannheim in an intergenerational dimension—it not only continues the collective emotional bond represented by the lyrics "love gives me strength", but also develops individual survival wisdom represented by the lyrics "making wishes to shooting stars" [22], preparing a template for meaning reproduction for subsequent subcultures such as "lying flat" and "Buddha-like".

Fourthly, *Want to sing and sing* is a cultural adjustment mechanism under hybrid identity. In the tension between globalization and localization, the youth group has developed a unique cultural collage, constituting a movement of transnational imagination and traditional reconstruction. In *Want to sing and sing*, the individual advancement of "approaching the sun" and the collective metaphor of "power" reflect the adjustment function of cultural hybrid identity. This adjustment manifests spatially as the identity negotiation of the "urban strangers" of 147 million Chinese migrants in 2005 [23], and temporally as a resilient response to "social acceleration", eventually evolving into a post-materialist transformation path with Chinese characteristics.

The functional mechanism of *Want to sing and sing* fundamentally represents the compensatory adaptation completed by the youth group during the period of social transformation through the cultural symbol system. Technological empowerment provides an experimental field for participatory democracy, value introversion constructs a defense mechanism for risk society, and cultural fusion realizes the reproduction of identity under the impact of globalization. This mechanism not only shapes the collective memory of the Millennials but also offers cultural samples for understanding the intergenerational value transformation in the Chinese-style modernization process.

3.2 Based on the Analysis of the Theme Song *Keep Walking* of Generation Z

Keep Walking is a popular song performed by Angela Zhang, included in her seventh studio album Visible Wings, which was released through Sony Music on October 12, 2012. On December 29, 2012, the song won the award at the 20th China Songs List. On April 25, 2013, it received the "Hong Kong and Taiwan Annual Golden Song" award at the Chinese TOP List.

3.2.1 Textual Analysis of *Keep Walking*

As an important text in Angela Zhang's music creation, this song uses metaphorical imagery and straightforward emotional declarations as carriers to construct a narrative space where youth dialogues with survival pressure. The lyrics, through the interweaving of multiple emotional dimensions, construct a complete emotional narrative field from individual trauma to collective awakening. The emotional tension of its text is displayed in the resonance between the symbolic system and musical language, specifically manifesting in three progressive levels: the concrete representation of sensory suppression, the aesthetic transformation of traumatic experiences, and the dynamic trajectory of subjectivity construction. The lyrics highlight the spiritual core of Generation Z youth maintaining a progressive stance in the face of adversity through the tension between the violence of natural climates and the resistance of the subjective spirit.

From the analysis of the text's surface structure, the lyrics unfold a narrative centered around the core imagery of "rain". Thunder, heavy rain, and muddiness are embodied natural elements that constitute the external symbols of an oppressive environment. Among them, "thunder is booming incessantly" creates psychological shock through auditory oppression, "rainwater splashing into the eyes" metaphorically uses physical pain to represent cognitive barriers, and "muddiness" is transformed into the material imprint of a struggle. These intense descriptions of natural phenomena are actually artistic projections of the structural dilemmas faced by contemporary youth, such as social competition pressure and crises of value identification. When constructing scenes of stress, the lyricist deliberately adopts a second-person perspective: "you can push me off a cliff", which personifies abstract social pressures as antagonistic "others". This narrative strategy strengthens the confrontational relationship between the subject and the source of pressure, laying the emotional foundation for the subsequent assertion of subjectivity.

In the adversarial narrative dimension, the lyrics accomplish a spiritual reconstruction through three sets of binary oppositions. The first is the dialectical relationship between physical pain and the awakening of will, where the physiological discomfort brought about by "rain" not only fails to make the subject recoil, but instead catalyzes a clear sense of direction in "deciding where I want to go". The second is the transformation of imagery between falling and flying, where the crisis of "being pushed off a cliff" is creatively reframed as an opportunity to "learn how to fly", demonstrating the mechanism of potential stimulation under pressure. The third is the conflict between the values of group

discipline and individual independence, where the declaration of "never listening to anyone's commands" is both a reflection on standardized life paths and an affirmation of personalized growth methods. This progressive resolution of oppositions deconstructs the linear causal relationship between stress and growth, constructing a new cognitive model of "stress-resistance-transcendence".

The emotional sublimation of lyrics is reflected in the expansion of collective value dimensions. From the individual declaration of "everyone should have dreams" to the universal care of "if it's sunlight, it should be warm," the narrative perspective has shifted from "I" to "we." Especially with the introduction of the "gem" metaphor in the lyrics, the struggle of Generation Z youth is placed in a dimension of value reevaluation. Social pressure is like the process of polishing an ore, with its ultimate significance being the dazzling presentation of individual uniqueness. This value reconstruction dispels the sense of nihilism under the context of "internal competition," granting existential significance to competitive pressure.

The emotional construction of *Keep Walking* has distinct characteristics of its time. The lyrics reject both the negative attitude of avoiding reality and criticize the alienated state of irrational competition, advocating instead for a philosophy of existence centered on dreams and supported by resilience. Through the "walking in the rain" metaphor, it aestheticizes the experience of stress, offering the Generation Z a solution that balances realistic care with idealism. At the level of popular culture, it poetically reconstructs a culture that resists setbacks.

3.2.2 Functional Analysis of *Keep Walking*

In the second decade of the 21st century, intertwined with globalized risk society and digital transformation, Angela Zhang's musical text *Keep Walking* transcends the entertainment attributes of popular culture. Through symbolic interaction rituals, it reconstructs the stress-resistance mechanism of Generation Z, establishing a unique generational survival strategy in the accelerated society of the digital age, becoming an important cultural code for decoding the spiritual schema of Generation Z.

The risk societalization process brought about by the shift in Chinese economic growth rate constitutes the objective foundation for the value transformation of Generation Z. With the deepening of economic structural adjustments, the continuous advancement of the disintegration of the unit system and the popularization of higher education form a dual tension. This places Generation Z at the critical juncture of material security and self-actualization. Such structural stress is encoded in lyrics as the auditory oppression of "thunder rumbling incessantly" and the physical pain of "rainwater splashing into the eyes." However, different from the direct resistance strategy of the Millennials, Generation Z has developed a more resilient philosophy of "enduring rain." Through the aesthetic transformation of "jewels should shine," they reconstruct systemic pressure into an ontological process of value forging. This cultural strategy not only continues the post-materialist pursuit of self-actualization but also creatively sublimates material anxiety into a necessary path

for spiritual rebirth. In the process of individualization, it realizes a localized interpretation of Inglehart's "silent revolution" theory.

As digital natives, Generation Z has formed a unique generational position in the "counter-structural relationship" reconstructed by mobile internet. The lyrical imagery of "you can push me off a cliff/I can learn to fly" is transformed, and when virtual communities become the new ritual space of "co-presence", Generation Z is able to rebuild value coordinates in digital interactions [24]. The specificity of this generational experience is reflected in three aspects of cultural adjustment: firstly, deconstructing traditional transition rituals into continuous network interaction ritual chains, achieving symbolic resistance to real-life pressure through collective performances in social media [25]; secondly, reconstructing interaction ritual elements, replacing physical gatherings with "virtual presence", and forming a new emotional energy storage mechanism through instant feedback [26]; thirdly, developing defensive individualization strategies of liquid solidarity, maintaining individual independence of "never listening to anyone's command", while maintaining collective emotional bonds of "being warm like sunlight" [27]. When Generation Z builds a "symbolic barrier" that excludes outsiders through circle-based aggregation, the intimate confiding of "making a wish on a shootiong star" in the lyrics is elevated to a group cultural ritual. The particularity of this digital interaction ritual lies in transforming the "physical co-presence" emphasized by traditional ritual theory into emotional resonance in data streams, and expanding physical symbols into flowing audio-visual texts.

At the level of constructing intergenerational cultural memory, "Walking in the Rain" successfully sublimated from individual trauma narratives to collective spiritual totems. When the "rain" imagery is spread through digital platforms and evolves into a unique stress-resistant symbol for Generation Z, its cultural function expands from a single musical text to a ritualistic medium of the digital age. Against the backdrop of structural adjustments in the job market, Generation Z reconstructs the symbolic relationship between "rain" and "sunshine", transforming systemic risks into adhesives for generational identity recognition. The concluding lyric, "Everyone Should Have Dreams," further highlights that in the process of value introversion in post-materialist generations, there remains a covert loyalty to the collective promise of happiness. This contradiction is precisely the typical symptom observed by Inglehart during the transitional period of value transformation.

The historical significance of this cultural practice lies in its anticipation of a new path for generational value transformation in the process of risk socialization. When Generation Z transforms the pressure of survival into emotional energy in digital rituals, reshaping the ethics of competition through the imagery of "learning to fly," Generation Z essentially develops a resilience paradigm that compatible with individual agency and collective belonging. This cultural strategy, which maintains the "autonomy" pursuit discussed by Inglehart and extends the generational "social character" emphasized by Mannheim, offers a unique solution for the generational turnover in Chinese society. In an era where algorithms increasingly dominate human emotional

structures, the textual vitality of "walking in the Rain" originates from its precise mapping of the digital natives' mental structures—at the junction of virtuality and reality, Generation Z experiences the physical sensation of "walking in the rain," writing the enterprising spirit of a post-materialist era.

3.3 Based on the Analysis of the Theme Song *Lonely Warrior* of Generation Alpha

Lonely Warrior is the Chinese theme song of the animation *Arcane: League of Legends* derived from the game LOL, performed by Eason Chan, and was released in the form of a single on November 8, 2021. On December 26, 2021, the song was rated as one of the top 10 best singles of the year by NetEase CloudMusic at the NetEase CloudMusic 2021 Music Awards; on December 28 of the same year, the song won the award for one of the top 10 songs in the 2021 Hall of Fame Humanities List·Music List; on March 17, 2023, the song was named one of the top 10 songs of the year by Weibo 2022; on June 30 of the same year, it received several awards at the 14th Chinese Golden Melody Awards, including "Best Mandarin Song of the Year" and "Top 10 Mandarin Golden Melodies". The theme of *Arcane: League of Legends* revolves around the conflict between the upper and lower city civilizations, the growth and transformation of heroes, and restores the images of unsung heroes in a non-traditional sense. *Lonely Warrior* is widely circulated among student groups. By searching for the keyword "*Lonely Warrior* elementary students" on various platforms, one can still find many popular content pieces, which is the most direct evidence of the song's success among students. On May 26, 2022, the official WeChat account of People's Daily published an article titled "Lonely Warrior Author Responds to the Song Becoming a Children's Song Music Warms the Hearts of Those Who Struggle", which reached 260 million reads; on July 4, 2022, the official WeChat account of People's Daily released a push article titled "Why Do Elementary Students Love Singing *Lonely Warrior*?" with over 100,000 reads.

3.3.1 Textual Analysis of *Lonely Warrior*

As a spiritual totem of contemporary youth culture, *Lonely Warrior* reconstructs the temporal connotation of heroism through deconstructionist narrative strategies, and establishes a survival philosophy of "building a city-state in ruins" through the disassembly and recombination of symbolic systems. The lyrics frame trauma and idealism in a dialectical structure, reflecting three interrelated themes: the reinterpretation of heroism, existential resilience, and symbolic rebellion.

At the level of symbolic system transformation, lyrics use images like "covered in mud" and "ragged clothes" to dethrone heroic narratives from the clouds to the dust. Concrete symbols like "broken dolls" and "wounds on the forehead" are used to collage a fragmented picture of life, deconstructing the traditional features of heroes' perfection. This ritualistic display of "imperfection" is essentially a challenge to the mainstream value system with a aesthetics of scars. When "alleys" and "ruins" replace temples and medals as narrative settings, the criterion for heroism has shifted from

the external recognition of "standing in the light" to the internal affirmation of "not kneeling posture," forming a subtle critique of the discourse of success.

The existential dimension of resistant narratives is manifested in the transformation of three dimensions: First, the dialectical unity of "loneliness" and "glory," where the lyrics confirm the value of marginalized identity through the continuous rhetorical question, "Why can't loneliness be glory?"; Second, the spiraling ascent of "lowliness" and "solitude," where the stance of confronting fate with "the lowest dream" resonates with the absurd heroism of Albert Camus's Sisyphus; Third, the creative transformation of "ruins" and "city-states," materializing Martin Heidegger's courage to "Being - towards - death" into the action declaration of "building a city-state on ruins." This narrative strategy of transforming existential dilemmas into creative momentum provides a spiritual anchor for youth in atomized survival dilemmas.

The ultimate value reconstruction of text is reflected in the collective emotional resonance mechanism. The second-person narrative perspective of "you" establishes a mirror dialogue structure, allowing every listener to complete self-identification in the intertextuality of "gaps are all the same". The refrain "Fight? Fight!" breaks through the constraints of linguistic reference, forming an emotional explosion point in the resonance between imperative and exclamatory sentences. This transformation from private monologue to public declaration elevates individual trauma to a common phenomenon of the era, as Jean Baudrillard said, "The most private pain is often the most common social symptom" [28].

The cultural significance of *Lonely Warrior* lies in its paradoxality: it is both a blade of deconstruction for heroism debunking and a poem of construction for re-establishing value coordinates. When "mud-stained" becomes the medal of new heroism, and when "walking alone in the dark alley" is sublimated as the pilgrimage path of existential courage, this hymn of the era has completed the replacement of what Slavoj Zizek called the "ideological sublime object" [29]—while deconstructing traditional sublimity, it casts a more vital spiritual totem for estranged individuals.

3.3.2 Functional Analysis of *Lonely Warrior*

In the present, where digital civilization and intelligent technology deeply reconstruct the experience of childhood, the resonance of *Lonely Warrior* with Generation Alpha essentially represents a collective semantic assignment by digital natives to their existential circumstances. As the first group of humans coexisting with the Internet of Things and artificial intelligence, Generation Alpha is born into a "augmented reality" woven from data streams, where smartwatches serve as social credentials and algorithmically-pushed short videos shape cognitive landscapes faster than textbooks. This liquid state of existence makes the loneliness and courage of Generation Alpha exhibit a unique digital dialectic—when "moments" replace paper classmates' directories, and when "Egg-partner" becomes a new paradigm for emotional connection, Generation Alpha has long deconstructed the "loneliness" in *Lonely Warrior* into the norm for digital nomads and reconstructed "courage" as

survival wisdom in the data jungle.

The shaping of this generational spirit is rooted in the triple structural survival paradox of the Generation Alpha. First, there is the existential anxiety associated with technological empowerment and cognitive precocity. As a group with a 34.2% pre-primary internet exposure rate, they encountered the dizziness of information overload earlier than any of their predecessors. The early technological wisdom only exacerbated the capability gap in real-life social interactions, just as the lyrics "unable to ride the wind" reveal the plight of digital natives. Second, the eternal game between personalized expression and algorithmic discipline. The social network established by the Generation Alpha through "touching" on smartwatches in their Moments, and the personal identity confirmed in subcultural practices such as playing bracelets, is essentially a resistance to the homogenization swallowing of data platforms by "building their own city-state". This creative breakout forms a spiritual isomorphism with "daring to block the fate gun with shabby clothes". Third, there's the coexisting contradiction between the awakening of cultural confidence and technological dependence. When the national trend becomes an aesthetic instinct at the DNA level, the Generation Alpha is both a generation "pampered" by algorithms and the first to discern the "AI ethical dilemma" clearly.

The spread of *Lonely Warrior* fission provides a symbolic solution to this existential paradox. In the re-creation frenzy on short video platforms, Generation Alpha transforms individual anxiety into collective narratives of digital tribes through the ritualistic shout of "Fight!" In the private space constructed by smart devices, the melody of "I love you walking alone in the dark alley" becomes an emotional anchor against the "information cocoon." This cultural practice essentially achieves a double transcendence, transforming the "stigma of loneliness" in traditional growth narratives into a digital nomad medal, and upgrading the one-dimensional quality of bravery to a compound survival courage that includes data literacy and algorithm critical thinking. When Generation Alpha "confronts despair" in the metaverse education scenario, they are unconsciously practicing the philosophical essence of the song's "kneeling posture." This is not a replication of classical heroism, but a declaration of subjectivity rebuilt on the ruins of data, as Slavoj Zizek puts it, "after passing through the ideological illusion".

Therefore, the cultural significance of *Lonely Warrior* has revolutionary proliferation among the Generation Alpha. While the adult world is still discussing the risks of "online addiction," the Generation Alpha has long constructed a spiritual barrier against alienation through music. This generational cognitive disconnect precisely demonstrates that the "loneliness" of the Generation Alpha is the inevitable cost of pioneers exploring the new continent of digital civilization, while their "bravery" is the new footnote written by technological natives for the evolution of human civilization.

4. Comparative Analysis and Discussion

Under the scrutiny of Mannheim's sociology of knowledge and Inglehart's theory of intergenerational value transformation, the 20-years cultural evolution from *Want to*

sing and sing to Lonely Warrior reveals a profound transformation of Chinese youth's values from "survival breakout" to "meaning reconstruction."

Firstly, the changes in social structure have formed three tensions in the process of modernization. In 2004, *Want to sing and sing* was born in the "compressed transition period" of Chinese modernization process: the contradiction between the expansion of higher education enrollment and the contraction of the job market, the risk socialization brought by the reform of state-owned enterprises, and the wave of technological democratization brought by the rising Internet penetration rate, together shaped the existential anxiety of the Millennials' "breaking through discipline". By 2012, during the period of *Keep Walking*, Chinese GDP growth rate shifted, the urbanization accelerated with a floating population of 236 million, and the digital transformation with a smartphone penetration rate exceeding 55% forced Generation Z to seek balance between material abundance and competitive alienation. The birth of *Lonely Warrior* in 2021 is embedded in the digital civilization context where the penetration rate of artificial intelligence reached 34% and the Metaverse education pilot was launched, and Generation Alpha reconstructs the meaning of existence in the coexistence of virtual and real life under algorithmic discipline.

Secondly, the reshaping of cognitive frameworks represents a spiritual breakthrough for three generations. The Millennials have completed the cognitive revolution from dependency in the work unit system to individualized expression through the "stage carnival" of *Want to sing and sing*. Their declaration of "singing if they want" is essentially a group awakening in the transition from an era of information asymmetry to network democratization—the data carnival of over 8 million text messages in the 2005 *Super Girl* finale voting confirmed the subversion of collective cognition by technological empowerment. The "rain philosophy" constructed by Generation Z in *Keep Walking* reflects the transitional characteristics from materialism to post-materialism: when the Chinese Gini coefficient reached 0.474 in 2012, Generation Z aesthetically transformed competitive pressure into value forging through the "jewel metaphor", achieving a cognitive upgrade of "breaking through adversity". By the time of Generation Alpha, the "ruined city" narrative of *Lonely Warrior* signifies the creative transformation of existential dilemmas by digital natives—in the context where algorithmic push dominates cultural consumption, the "kneeling posture" is elevated to be a spiritual declaration against data alienation.

Thirdly, the innovation of cultural symbols promotes the intergenerational reproduction of value consensus. Three generations of young people have completed differentiated value encoding through music texts: The "fluorescent stick community" of the Millennials correspond to the emotional connection of mobile young people in the urbanization process, and the "quasi-public sphere" created by their text message voting is essentially a Chinese practice of Habermas' communication theory; The "liquid solidarity" of Generation Z maintains an "independent yet coexisting" generational identity through virtual presence; The "digital nomadism" of Generation Alpha is reflected in numerous secondary creative videos on short video platforms, rebuilding subjectivity in the

algorithmic ruins. Such symbolic innovation confirms the core proposition of Mannheim's "social generation" theory, that each generation is reconstructing cultural symbols to cope with their unique "historical coordinates".

Fourthly, the transformation of the theoretical framework marks the shift from individual awakening to societal coexistence. The evolution of values over the past 20 years presents a clear trajectory: the Millennials' "breakthrough discipline" completed the value enlightenment from collectivist dependency to individual-centric; Generation Z's "resilient adjustment" explored an intermediate path for pressure transformation in competitive alienation; Generation Alpha's "digital coexistence" signifies the maturity of post-materialist values. When "lone courage" becomes the keyword, it indicates that the youth have transcended survival anxiety and turned towards a deeper pursuit of social justice and spiritual resonance. This transformation reveals the unique logic of Chinese modernization process: the value transformation completed within compressed time and space is essentially the creative response of generational groups to societal risks.

From the individual outcry of *Want to sing and sing* to the collective empathy of *Keep Walking*, three generations of young people have written an epic of the "Chinese-style modernization" spirit through music texts. These cultural symbols are not only the vane of value transformation but also the key to understanding the generational replacement in Chinese society. In the tension between tradition and modernity, locality and globality, materialism and spirituality, young people have always been the pioneering force in reconstructing value coordinates.

5. Conclusion

This paper reveals the intergenerational evolution of Chinese youth's values from "collectivist dependency" to "individual resilience" to "algorithmic collective heroism" through an intergenerational text analysis of three representative pop songs.

Generation	Core Contradiction	Cultural Symbol	Theme Song
Millennials	Educational Expansion vs. Employment Risk	Stage Carnival	*Want to Sing and Sing*
Generation Z	Material Abundance vs. Competitive Alienation	Resilient Dialectics	*Keep Walking*
Generation Alpha	Algorithmic Governance vs. Cognitive Precocity	Algorithmic Heroism	*Lonely Warrior*

This value transformation is not only the spiritual mirror of Chinese social structure transformation under the backdrop of globalization: the triple historical leap from the disintegration of the unit system to the emergence of risk society and then to the rise of digital civilization, but also the practical result of the younger generation's creative use of cultural symbols for intergenerational dialogue. When the traditional value system encounters a deconstruction crisis, the youth always establish a new meaning coordinate on the ruins through symbol reconstruction. This endless cultural creation is the freshest spiritual code of Chinese social transformation.

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