

Research on the Visual Representation of Little Red Book's "New Chinese Style" from the Perspective of Platform Cultural Production

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Abstract. This paper examines the visual representation of "New Chinese Style" on the Xiaohongshu platform by drawing on theories of simulacra, the society of the spectacle, and media framing. In recent years, Xiaohongshu has become a key site for lifestyle sharing and aesthetic trends among young Chinese users, where traditional cultural elements are increasingly blended with digital visual practices. The rise of the "New Chinese Style" reflects both the popularity of national aesthetics online and the influence of platform-driven modes of cultural production. The study reveals that although the visual style embodies young users' emotional identification with traditional culture, it is increasingly shaped by platform mechanisms into a highly templated, commodified spectacle. The findings highlight how digital platforms re-encode cultural symbols and how youth users navigate the tension between cultural revival and algorithmic regulation in their visual expressions.

Keywords: Digital Spectacle, Simulacra, Platform Logic, Youth Cultural Expression, Visual Culture in Algorithmic Environments

1. Introduction

In today's algorithm-driven visual culture, young people in China are shaping a digital aesthetic known as "New Chinese Style," blending traditional elements with the aesthetics of social media to create a highly visual, platform-centered form of guofeng (national style) content. Xiaohongshu (The Red Note), a platform covering fashion, beauty, home décor, and travel, has become a key stage for the narrative of a "revival of Chinese aesthetics."

Yet as the #NewChineseStyle hashtag is repeatedly replicated and marketed on the platform, the style is sliding into templated and commodified forms, raising questions about what "cultural revival" truly means in a digital, platform-dominated context. Building on Debord's "society of the spectacle" [1] and Best & Kellner's discussion of participatory spectacle governance [2], this paper examines how algorithms, tags, and traffic logic reshape cultural meaning, and how users negotiate their self-expression and identity within the platform's disciplinary framework. It explores how traditional culture is reworked—and sometimes distorted—inside the digital ecosystem.

2. Literature review

2.1. Xiaohongshu and the platform context of "New Chinese style"

In recent years, Chinese social media has gradually entered an era dominated by images. Xiaohongshu, a platform predominantly utilized by female users that integrates consumption guidance and lifestyle sharing, has emerged as key driver behind the proliferation of the "New Chinese Style" visual aesthetic. This phenomenon can be attributed to the platform's algorithm logic, visual orientation, and user structure, which collectively provide a conducive environment for the dissemination of this aesthetic. The explosive expansion of this style was not the result of pure cultural interest or aesthetic spontaneity. Rather, it resulted from a structured construction process involving platform mechanisms, content production, and consumption logic.

First, Xiaohongshu relies on image-driven user-generated content (UGC) to build its content ecosystem. However, within the context of the platform, UGC does not necessarily constitute free expression. Barbosa's observations regarding UGC, understood as an expression form embedded within the platform's control logic, underscore its role as a dynamic production mechanism that aligns with the platform's dissemination effects and objectives. Huang and Ye observe that platforms like Xiaohongshu endow content with commercial value by promoting visual formats with high traffic potential [3]. The platform establishes the paradigm for "popular content" through visual mechanisms such as likes, recommendations, and tags, thereby encouraging users to optimize their creations around specific visual styles (e.g., antique makeup, Hanfu composition, tea ware photography). This process gives rise to the formation of a highly repetitive visual symbol system. In this process, the "New Chinese-style" gradually loses its openness to cultural innovation and becomes a visual commodity that can be identified and replicated by algorithms.

Secondly, Xiaohongshu propels the "New Chinese-style" paradigm toward the platform center through a tripartite mechanism of "tags + algorithms + user behavior." Huang and Ye have noted that short video platforms assign commercial value to content through traffic structures and reinforce the standardized classification of its dissemination potential [4]. In the context of high-traffic tags, such as "New Chinese-style fashion," users emulate the compositions, poses, and aesthetics of viral posts and utilize standardized narratives to gain favor on the platform. This homogenization trend is not merely a reflection of user preferences but also a consequence of algorithmic filtering and platform rules, thereby unveiling the profound collusion between the visual content economy and platform mechanisms.

Furthermore, as a highly gendered visual cultural space, Xiaohongshu contributes to the evolution of the expressive forms of "New Chinese-style" through the medium of aesthetic norms. In a social media platform predominantly utilized by female users, the body functions not only as a medium of expression but also as social capital within the platform's aesthetic mechanisms [5]. "New Chinese Style" places significant emphasis on aesthetic qualities such as "gentleness," "classicism," and "elegance", which are consistently amplified within the platform's structure and solidified as the prevailing visual mainstream. This mechanism causes female users to actively adjust their self-expression to conform to the platform's aesthetic preconceptions of the "national style female image" in pursuit of social recognition and traffic rewards. Consequently, female users become both executors and subjects of aesthetic logic while producing content.

In summary, the "New Chinese-style" is undergoing a transformation from a cultural revival practice initiated by young people into a marketable visual system dominated by platform logic. Driven by platform recommendation mechanisms, content standardization, and gender aesthetic norms, it is being translated into a repeatable and quantifiable visual language. Images gradually

detach themselves from their original cultural contexts, becoming intermediary tools linking aesthetics, social interaction, and consumption. In this process, culture no longer unfolds through meaning but is folded into a flattened visual symbol system under the dominance of traffic and algorithms. This transformation superficially maintains the forms of traditional culture but obscures the boundaries between cultural reinterpretation and commodity production.

2.2. The landscape society: the visualization and distortion of culture

The rise of "New Chinese Style" a structural transformation in cultural expression on digital platforms. Debord's Society of the Spectacle describes the "landscape" as social relations mediated by images, embodying capital accumulation [1]. In the digital age, images not only represent culture but also organize social structures, daily life, and aesthetic identity.

Best and Kellner note that the spectacle has moved from an external commodity to a logic embedded in users' practices, standardizing culture. Baudrillard's simulacra theory adds that when symbols are detached and endlessly recirculated, culture relies less on historical authenticity and more on algorithm- and template-driven symbolic systems [1].

As The Competition of Landscapes observes, under current traffic structures an image's "authority" comes from dissemination efficiency and algorithmic favor, not cultural authenticity [6]. Visual landscapes thus emerge as a "new normal" co-produced by algorithms, platforms, and users.

This framework positions "New Chinese Style" as a form shaped by visual mechanisms and amplified by platform logic, which underpins the subsequent analysis of content homogenization, cultural simulacra, and spectatorial identity.

3. Methodology

The present study focuses on the Chinese social media platform Xiaohongshu. Its objective is to explore how "New Chinese Style," an emerging visual culture, is constructed, circulated, and transformed into a landscape within the platform's mechanisms and user practices. The selection of Xiaohongshu as the primary social platform for this study was predicated on its considerable influence within China's social media ecosystem. As a social networking platform primarily utilized by female users, Xiaohongshu has established a cohesive aesthetic field and content preferences. Consequently, it functions as a natural incubator for the "New Chinese Style" cultural trend, which places significant emphasis on aesthetic imagery and visual replication.

The subjects of this study are popular text and image content that has been tagged with the term "New Chinese Style." Samples were selected from the top 30 most popular topics, including but not limited to fashion notes, architectural space design, illustration, photography, cultural communication, and traditional cultural artifact displays. Eighteen samples were selected through keyword searches and interaction volume rankings; these samples had rich content and clear visual styles.

Methodologically, this study employs qualitative text analysis to conduct an in-depth interpretation of the samples from two dimensions: image composition and textual narration. The present study combines platform mechanisms and algorithmic recommendations to explore the logic behind the standardization of aesthetics. Image analysis focuses on color coordination, symbolic usage, and the construction of visual ambiance, while textual analysis centers on titles, captions, comments, and the number of likes and saves. This examination explores how users narrate stories around "Chinese aesthetic sensibility" and cultural identity. Concurrently, the study examines the structural role of the platform's recommendation mechanisms, particularly whether a trend toward

"aesthetic homogenization" exists. To this end, the study analyzes popular trends, tag systems, and content distribution pathways to uncover the specific way in which "tradition" is represented within the platform.

The present study endeavors to respond to the process and mechanism by which "New Chinese-style" visual culture is constructed as a cultural landscape on social media platforms, as illuminated by the aforementioned analysis.

It is important to acknowledge that Xiaohongshu's content architecture is subject to inherent limitations inherent to the platform. A comparison of Xiaohongshu and Douyin reveals notable distinctions in their respective focuses and audience demographics. While Douyin emphasizes short video content and caters to a broader viewership, Xiaohongshu focuses more on textual-visual notes, with a content style that is often polished and templated, lacking spontaneity and diverse forms of expression.

Furthermore, the user community is characterized by its high degree of specialization, and the expression styles of its members are influenced by the platform's prevailing aesthetic preferences. Despite the limited scope of the sample and the inability to generalize the findings, an exhaustive examination of content and visual logic provides significant insights into platform culture and visual landscapes.

4. Discussion

4.1. Cultural expression in "viewing": user creation and identity performance

Analysis of popular topics and tags shows that #new Chinese aesthetic has over 300 million views. This statistic underscores the platform's implicit screening logic: content with striking visual appeal and distinct stylistic features gains greater visibility. Sample observation indicates a recurring visual formula—red walls, plum blossoms, cheongsam, delicate eyebrow makeup, symmetrical layouts, and negative space—refined through uniform filters and tones to create a platform-specific "watchable tradition."

In the digital media environment, such images detach from their original contexts and become circulable, self-referential symbols co-produced by users and platforms [1]. Cultural identity here is less rooted in authentic cultural experience or creative expression, and more focused on replicating templates to gain attention.

This logic reflects post-consumer society, where value shifts from the material attributes of objects to the symbolic recognition they generate [2]. Many "traditional culture" posts, though well-liked, spark little substantive discussion, with comments reduced to praise or product inquiries. Especially in makeup and fashion, interaction centers on commodity links, creating an illusion of cultural engagement.

Ultimately, user expression is shaped into a responsive practice aligned with preset platform labels and content configurations. This transforms "New Chinese Style" from a continuation of tradition into a standardized performance and consumption of it.

4.2. Platform mechanisms: algorithmic power and cultural choice

While "New Chinese Style" on Xiaohongshu appears to reflect users' aesthetic choices, it is heavily shaped by the platform's algorithms, tag systems, and distribution rules. Through a "filter bubble" effect, algorithmic filtering becomes normalized, locking users into narrow aesthetic ranges and limiting diverse expression [7]. Once a preference for specific styles is detected, the platform

promotes similar images, music, and tag structures, reinforcing a self-contained aesthetic environment [8].

Content visibility on the platform is closely tied to its degree of formatting and compliance with platform norms. Recommended posts often feature standardized tag combinations, fixed editing rhythms, and templated compositions, which creators adopt as "successful post" strategies [9]. This operational logic drives structural homogeneity.

Such mechanisms influence cultural value rankings: high-quality videos on Song Dynasty art may receive minimal engagement, while highly standardized cross-dressing videos attract thousands of interactions—reflecting algorithmic capital as a new form of cultural power [10].

Following Scheufele's media framework model, platforms construct and entrench dominant visual paradigms, users adapt and refine them, and feedback loops amplify their authority [5,11]. In this closed system, "New Chinese Style" shifts from individual aesthetic choice to a product of collusion between algorithms, platform logic, and user aesthetic preferences, defined by standardization, computability, and algorithmic compatibility.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Landscape and repetition: the "Chinese-style" visual cycle under platform mechanisms

Given its primary focus on text and image content and its targeting of female users, Xiaohongshu functions as a natural breeding ground for the dissemination and popularity of the "new Chinese-style" visual aesthetic. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that this user-generated content (UGC)-driven content ecosystem is not value-neutral. The platform establishes explicit parameters for content visibility through mechanisms such as trending charts, tags, and recommendations, thereby effectively filtering and shaping perceptions of "what constitutes worthwhile traditional culture" and "what innovative forms hold greater value" [8].

This mechanism functions not merely as a neutral distribution tool, but rather as a unifying agent, constructing a cohesive "Chinese-style" aesthetic template at the visual level. Traditional cultural elements are subjected to a high degree of standardization and transformed into image-based narrative resources under platform control. This process ultimately gives rise to a set of "standardized viewing practices." The platform's function extends beyond mere visibility, actively contributing to the cultural signification through visual precepts. The crux of this process does not lie in the authenticity of cultural representation; rather, it is found in the landscape mechanism's allocation and recognition of visibility.

Amid strong platform-driven standardization, some young users still seek to express their ritual and emotional connections to traditional culture through clothing, cultural-themed compositions, and other forms, even attempting to disrupt template-based aesthetics. These efforts, though often peripheral and with limited reach, show attempts to preserve cultural subjectivity within a disciplinary framework. Yet they also adapt to recommendation logic and visual norms, adjusting strategies to gain visibility. Over time, innovation yields to repetitive visual symbols, and images detach from context to become assets consumed by the platform. As Debord notes, the spectacle replaces reality with images, creating a "simulated reality" [1]; when culture becomes replicable symbols, it turns into "consumable tradition" [10].

This dynamic has a dual nature. Standardized templates and tag structures can improve the efficiency of cultural communication and lower the threshold for participation, helping "New Chinese Style" move from subculture to the mainstream through visual coding and marketing. As Kaneva observes, media structures mediate cultural identity and foster digital communities with

shared aesthetics [10]. Young users thus act as both adapters of the platform landscape and as adjusters within it, with each creative choice balancing algorithmic constraints against the desire for cultural voice.

6. Conclusion

This paper focuses on "New Chinese-style" visual content on the Xiaohongshu platform. By integrating the theories of simulacra, the landscape society, and media framing, it analyzes the dynamic tensions between platform mechanisms, user expression, and the visualization of traditional culture.

The findings show that while the style embodies young people's emotional projections and identity aspirations toward traditional culture, under the dual shaping of recommendation algorithms and traffic logic, such expressions become increasingly templated, symbolized, and commodified, forming a "visual landscape" that "viewable, replicable, and monetizable. Traditional culture is reconfigured as "simulated tradition," with its significance transformed into social capital and traffic metrics within the platform ecosystem.

However, this is not a one-way manipulation of the landscape. Xiaohongshu's features—text and images as main content, and a clear aesthetic orientation—provide a cultural space for disseminating "New Chinese-style" content. On one hand, standardized visual grammar facilitates the circulation of "New Chinese Style" content; on the other, it lowers the participation threshold for users and creates opportunities for creative practice. Although expression is embedded in platform rules, the choices, imitations, and adjustments in creative behavior still reflect cultural agency, showing how young people participate in cultural production in the digital age.

This study reveals the cultural power logic behind the phenomenon through the interaction of visual culture and platform mechanisms, filling a gap in research on the visual communication of traditional culture in digital platforms. It highlights the negotiation between individual expression and platform structures in cultural recoding, offering insights into how meaning is generated and flows in the digital context, and how young people seek expression within structural constraints.

Future research could compare visual construction mechanisms of 'New Chinese Style' on short-video platforms such as Douyin and Weibo, or expand the scope from "New Chinese-style" to the re-expression of traditional elements like poetry, opera, and architecture in digital spaces. The mechanisms through which algorithms intervene in "the tradition that can be seen" also merit further analysis. Cross-platform, multi-dimensional studies may further reveal the relationships between cultural agency, expression mechanisms, and identity construction in the digital landscape.

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