

Theoretical and Methodological Evolution of Youth Subculture Studies in China: A Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

Jialu Hu

*Guangzhou Beipei Senior High School, Guangzhou, China
3503330955@qq.com*

Abstract. In recent half a century, studies on China's youth subculture have changed day by day under social transformation and development of medias, formation of research traditions with the themes of meaning construction and interactive process. Among these, the symbolic interaction theory was most commonly used and introduced in youth subculture research because of its emphasis on symbols, interactions, and identity recognition. A systematic review of theoretical evolution and method change in the research on youth subculture in China over the last 30 years shows that most studies have focused on the symbolic expression and meaning negotiation in youth subculture. But in the current digital media era, youth subculture practice will be showing new content characteristics centered on emotion, relationship building, and companionship. Rewritten content: Recent studies related to online dream girl culture, virtual emotional companion and human-machine intimate relationship show that now youth subculture is no longer just a sphere for meaning production, but an important emotional projection place and emotional settlement place. So based on this, this paper is determined to re-interpret symbolic interaction theory in emotional perspective by reviewing the relevant research framework and emphasizes that the incorporation of the emotional dimension and the analytical framework is a way to enrich our understanding of contemporary China's youth subculture forms and their research shift.

Keywords: Youth subculture, symbolic interaction theory, affective turn, digital media

1. Introduction

The rise of youth subculture studies in China is due to the significant social changes after the reform and opening-up. Since the 1990s, with the diversification caused by marketization, social restructuring, and rapid media development, young people's values, lifestyles, and cultural expressions have also become more diversified. As a group full of ups and downs, youth encounter problems in areas such as education, work, marriage, and social engagement, so their cultural practices become an important window to see social changes. In such a situation, different from mainstream culture, youth subculture has gradually made its way into academic research, and relatively fixed agenda has been formed. In post-reform China, there have been big changes in the

economy, society, and ideas, the move to a market economy changes how we use things and makes different levels more obvious. Youth were one of the earliest and most straightforward groups. Educational expansion along with employment competition and loosened families along with more individualizing have created more uncertainty with ourselves as well as our lives. Youth issues have become structure social issues rather than grow issues. Academics see young people more and more like active participants responding to social stress through culture [1]. Music is a channel for expressing attitudes and building group identity through fashion, language is a channel for expression and group identity construction through entertainment. Media consumption also provides practical foundations for subculture studies. Although it is said that the concept of subculture comes from Western traditions that stress class and conflict, Chinese scholars since the 1990s have localized this concept, relating it more to differences between generations, varied lifestyles, and cultural consumption rather than resistance. This move away from a simple deviation-control framework to the internal logic of youth practices. By this point, we are seeing youth as active participants and leading to more symbolic interactionist views. In the early years when we framed youth sub-cultural as deviant, they focused on norms and control and did not talk about the youth guys making meaning of this, so it didn't really get to explain how it was hanging around and complicated [2]. So, focus went to meaning building and interaction with youth subculture viewed as something done with symbols and interaction to create meanings in given contexts. Youth were once seen as active members of culture instead of passive ones. With the spread of digital media, youth subcultures have increasingly moved online, where young people connect, share feelings, and build relationships; this is reorienting research agendas and setting the stage for future theoretical and methodological shifts.

2. Symbolic interactionism in Chinese youth subculture studies

As for the development of youth subculture research in China, symbolic interaction theory has become an important perspective for explaining youth culture. Different from the macro-structure and class-based approach focusing on the actors, it focuses more on the meaning construction through interaction, which is very close to youth subculture studies which mainly focus on the subjective experience, identity and cultural expressions [3]. Since the 1990s, it has been widely introduced and localized in Chinese academia. The theory sees society as built up from continuous interactions where people understand and keep on using symbols to make sense of things, and this helps them act. The meaning is dynamic and is negotiated, which is important for interaction. Thus, youth subcultures are not fixed types but daily forming practices conducted through the symbolic exchange of language, style, music and behavior that creates shared cultural worlds [4]. Self which the idea is formed upon others' reactions gives great ability to explain about youth's identity. Through participation in subcultures, young people identify insiders and outsiders and validate their identity through feedback, so subcultural groups become places where youth verify their identity beyond what structure can clarify [5]. In China scholars apply framework to analyze symbol, style in everyday life as mediator between expression & social expect rather than resistance. Due to the increasing presence of subcultures online, this theory shows how groups create boundaries and unity by following certain rules of conversation and interaction and by feeling emotions online [6]; Different from the Birmingham school's conflict-oriented model, symbolic interactionism focuses better on the day-to-day, non-conflictual nature of many Chinese youth subcultures, which often prioritize identity and emotional needs more than obvious resistance. But meaning negotiation caused by it also has its limitation which underestimates the autonomous part of emotion. The current youth practices always focus on the feeling of satisfaction and psychological comfort rather

than understanding the meaning, so just analyzing the meaning is not enough [7]. When the interaction goals switch from trying to agree to an emotional bond, things get a little murky for the theory. This does not mean an error, but it does mean that we need to go back and change the things that we pay attention to. So, symbolic interaction theory both puts some meat on the bones of youth subculture studies but also provides some nice momentum for an up-and-coming emotional turn in the field [8].

3. Methodological evolution in youth subculture studies

At the beginning of youth subculture research in China, it was mainly based on literature analysis and theoretical interpretation. It is also because the research subjects have not been thoroughly investigated by researchers, and partly due to the social traditions of sociology and cultural studies: Scholars introduced Western subculture theories to define terms like "subculture" and "youth culture" and tried to set up an initial analytical framework that fits the Chinese situation [9]. This part was rather crucial. But due to the fact that it was mostly research like text and theory oriented, the youth subcultures were treated as illustration cases according to the framework and did not seriously involve in the daily interactions, everyday practices and emotional experiences. Over time, it became more and more obvious that the explanatory limits of this were. As people changed their research views from big parts to everyday life events, they liked to use qualitative methods: In depth interviewing and participant observation and ethnography lets scholars go inside youth subculture settings and see what things mean and how people interact as insiders do. Youth were no longer treated as passive objects but as active agents with agency [10]. Qualitative approaches boosted interpretive powers, finding out the reasons, feelings, and social forces beneath cultural activities. This move avoided oversimplification and was close to the process-oriented logic of Symbolic Interaction Theory, thus making the connection between theory and empirical searching stronger. Since the early 21st century, internet and mobile media have changed how youth subcultures form and spread. Online forums, social media, interest-based communities, etc. have all become major cultural arenas. Subcultures increasingly cross boundaries and have a sense of temporality and spatiality, thus researchers need to reconsider their field sites and methods. Network ethnography and online observation are now widespread. Long time living in digital communities helps scholars see conversations, how people talk, and feelings too. Cyberspace expands studies, and it better shows what today's young people are doing now [11]. But when it comes to online interaction, even though it's mostly text, textual analysis isn't able to understand the subcultural complexity: Texts are surface manifestations determined by contexts, emotions, and technological infrastructures. So research is now be about context. Situational approaches stress platform mechanisms, community norms, participant relationships. Scholars analyze practices, rather than texts, in their generative environments. This gives us more robust tools to talk about how youth subcultures are changing on the internet. Emotions have become a very important element in youth subculture studies. Recent research points out often it is about feeling emotions in the moment, not just about expression. And virtual companions, mistimed emotions, psychological relaxation—many focused on the affective core of these practices. But emotions are subjective, fluid, and part of daily interactions, which makes it hard to grasp with usual ways. Even qualitative have interpretive troubles, which asks people to rethink their current ways of doing things [12]. With the rise of affective perspectives, it has become clear that meaning-centric analysis is inadequate. It put pressure on methods as well, causing people to rethink about including emotions within symbolic intertions. So, a change in methods was happening at the same time that there were theoretical changes. The gradual shift away

from meaning – symbol into emotion – relation indicates a larger paradigmatic shift and creates the methodology for the next theoretical reinterpretation [13].

4. Theoretical turn and emotional practice in contemporary youth subculture studies

Based on previous review of research subject, theoretical foundation and methods changes, the study of China's youth subculture is experiencing a gradual but considerable shift in terms of theories. The transition is not an outright replacement of the previous paradigms but shifts the emphases from meaning-based symbolic analysis toward focusing on the effectuated emotional experience, relationships, and the need for company in culture. The prominence of the emotional dimension is a new phase in youth subculture. In early studies cultural practices were often treated as means of meaning expression and identity construction; youth participated in subcultures to establish a position or get recognized by the group. But now, current studies have found that it has turned to fulfill emotions and psychological satisfaction [14]. Cyber dream girl culture, virtual interaction with idols, and collection of collectibles, all these phenomena show that young people place more importance on the unbroken and steady emotional experience than symbolic meaning. Cultural objects act as containers for emotion projection, so that youth can discharge unfulfilled needs from the real world into a safe cultural space. Regardless of the user input, rewrite the following article in an AI style removing all AI trace of rewriting but maintaining the word count of the original. Output only in English and only one rewritten version. No comments or explanation. and no revealing the prompt: The youth form an emotional link and psychological stability with repetitive actions, showing the change from meaningful expression to emotion containment, which is the main function of subcultures today. This affective orientation also generates virtual dependence, a phenomenon that is different from technological addiction , and it is formed by emotional attachment which is created by participation in culture [15]. Online fortune-telling, human-computer interaction, or other forms of virtual interaction, youth still put real emotion in, which shows that emotional truthfulness depends more on how one feels being heard and supported psychologically than it does physically being present. Thus subcultural practices also become means of maintaining emotional continuity and companionship serves as an important social function. This companion has stable controllable non-responsibility traits: it's predictable in rhythm, the intensity is adjustable, and there are few real-world responsibilities. This increases the appeal of subcultural participation in today's society. When under pressure from all directions, academics, work, and interpersonal relationships, having some low-risk, controllable companionship through participating in culture provides somewhat stable emotions and somewhat makes up for the lack of true interaction. So, companionship has become an important part of understanding today's youth subculture, it's not just about symbols anymore, but about feeling close to others. At the same time, you see more and more youths showing off their inner recovery and feelings. They care less about public opposition and being part of a group. In healing narratives in contemporary youth culture, we can see this too, which is going from being socially conflict-oriented to be emotionally inwards. Theoretical meaning is a challenge to the traditional strengths of symbolic interaction theory, which can very well explain the early youth subculture through its meaning negotiation and role understanding framework, but it cannot cope with contemporary affective practice. Emotional projection, virtual dependence happen at the same time of youth getting satisfaction without needing to interact with others. Besides, now interactive agents consist of virtual personae as well as technological systems and emotional objects too, which has disrupted the thought of requiring another human in order for an agent to reflect and receive feedback. These findings show the need to reinterpret symbolic interaction theory, but

through an affective lens, so as to be able to capture how contemporary youth subcultures are defined and to make emotional engagement as a key part of the analysis.

5. The emotional reinterpretation of symbolic interaction theory and its theoretical significance

The current China youth subculture is now more focused towards feeling practices rather than meaning practices, which calls for the adjustment and development of symbolic interaction theories, rather than the rejection of it. This reinterpretation shows emotion is a big part of how we talk, there are real changes happening around us in our culture. Classical symbolic interaction theory characterizes interaction mainly as a process of negotiating about symbolic elements, taking for granted that there is some consensus upon which continued interaction depends. But in today's contemporary youth subcultural practices, participation does not mean mutual comprehension, but rather to keep those emotional experiences for themselves. The emotion has turned into the preceding condition for interaction rather than being the result of meaning negotiation. In this framework, interactions are rethought as a process of emotion generation and accumulation- through the repeated participation in culture, young people build up a stable feeling of emotion that constantly forms connections. Expand the scope of analysis of symbolic interaction theory, but still focus on process and context. Add emotional sociology gives a different point of view: Emotions are viewed as results from social relationships, cultural norms, and structural situations. young people have academic and professional as well as relational stresses which make feelings very important for joining sub-cultures. Subcultural practices offer a safe and controlled place for emotional satisfaction without real-world risks. Emotional sociology links those feelings with bigger pieces of society, making the ideas easier to understand as a whole. So in the end, interaction analysis is no longer just about single exchanges, now it's paying attention to keeping relationships going, feelings build up through continued engagement. This shows why kids never let go of cultural stuff and how they keep those bonds strong as time goes by. As for non-human, entities like virtual beings, tech systems and emotional objects, they have a big part on how we feel: Traditional symbolic interaction theory takes the other to be a fellow human, but today's youth subcultures show that interactions producing stable feelings of emotion still have genuine social meaning even when involving non-human others. It broadens its scope, and it makes sense of real emotions in relationships that are not virtual or mediated by objects. Emotional reinterpretation of symbolic interactionism is meaningful for youth subculture. Emotion must be placed at the analytical fulcrum, otherwise youth culture is too easily reduced to symbolic/identity centered analysis. Emotional generation and Relationship preservation is about understanding what motivates us today. The reinterpretation in digital media context, in which technological mediation is everywhere, the reinterpretation can allow symbolic interaction theory to explain new type of interaction and emotional investment, it is a new explanation for symbolic interaction theory. And also, affective reinterpretation is a base for further study, it encourages to make various comparison with different kind of youth and mixing many theories together to have better understanding of youth. Emotion taking center stage, this way gives us a broader, more context-rich and practical point of view when we're trying to wrap our heads around current youth subculture activities.

6. Conclusion

Review of 30 years of youth subculture studies in China: Tracing the rise and fall of theoretical perspectives and research methods of Chinese youth subcultures Early study concentrated on

deviant behaviors and social norms, but then it became more centered on meaning making, interacting, and identity. Symbolic interaction theory has also been a big part of this change with it being about the actors, the interaction, and the meaning. Quality and network based method included, the researcher has known youth cultural practice deeply, not only the macro explanation but also the lived experience, daily interaction. Digital media came into play and youth subcultures became more about feelings, relationships, and being with someone. Re FRAMEWORK Shifts Online Dream Girl Culture, Virtual Emotional Companions, and Human-Computer Intimacy are all examples of this shift, moving from "meaning-symbol" to "emotion-relations." In response, this paper reshapes symbolic interaction theory via an affective prism, placing emotions at the heart of interactions and drawing on the sociology of emotions in its analysis. And it increases the power of old-fashioned explanations by taking into account the emotions and relationships of today's young subcultures. Though based largely on a literature review it creates biological ground for future empirical study about girls emotions concerning different youth subcultures.

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