

# Sound Waves and Thought Currents: A Study of the Pop Music Reflection of Chinese Youth's Values Since the Reform and Opening-up

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doi:10.63593/AS.2709-9830.2025.04.004

## Abstract

Since the reform and opening up, the evolving relationship between Chinese pop music and youth values has distinctly mirrored societal shifts. Pop music, as a central conduit of youth subculture, plays a pivotal role in shaping and reflecting youth values through its aesthetic and value-laden expressions. Utilizing Marxist value theory, in tandem with sociological and cultural research lenses, the trajectory from 1978 to 2023 can be segmented into four phases: Enlightenment and Awakening (1978-1986): This period underscores the shift from collectivism to a heightened sense of individual consciousness. Fission and Resistance (1987-1991): These years are marked by cultural critique and a rise in identity anxiety. Diversity and Return (1992-2011): This phase captures the dichotomy between globalization and local identity. Integration and Leadership (2012-2023): Here, we see the seamless merging of core values with multiculturalism. The thematic evolution and stylistic innovations in pop music consistently parallel the modern transformation of youth values. This musical metamorphosis resonates with collective emotional shifts during societal transitions and bolsters the emergence of cultural confidence. Looking forward, nurturing youth values will necessitate a multi-tiered educational framework, underpinned by mainstream value guidance, cultural carrier innovation, and collaborative institutional practices.

**Keywords:** pop music, Chinese youth, reform and opening-up, values, youth subculture

## 1. Introduction

Pop music, as the predominant cultural medium among youth, significantly influences the formation of contemporary values and beliefs through its aesthetic orientation and value expression. This influence spans from the introduction of Hong Kong and Taiwan pop music in the 1980s, which sparked individual consciousness, to the cultural critique inherent in rock music of the 1990s, and extends to the diverse culture fostered by streaming media in the digital era. These three major transitions in pop music culture are intricately interconnected with collective anxieties, identity recognition, and cultural confidence that shape young people's values. As such, they provide a crucial reference for establishing a youth value cultivation system within the context of a socialist cultural powerhouse.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: The Bidirectional Construction of Values and Popular Music

### 2.1 A Multidimensional Analysis of Values: From Philosophical Foundations to Generational Characteristics

Values, a fundamental concept, are shared across numerous disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, and psychology. Though these disciplines may emphasize different aspects in their definitions, it is generally accepted that values influence individuals' judgments on crucial issues, including concepts of good versus bad and important versus unimportant.

From a Marxist perspective, values represent “the quintessence of people’s comprehension of value, encompassing their standards, principles, and evaluative methods concerning people and objects.” Beili Zhu posits that values pertain to individuals’ assessments of right and wrong, good and evil, and the significance of their surroundings, including their perception of human worth and the essence of life. Xiting Huang and Yong Zheng argue that values constitute the conceptual framework individuals employ to differentiate between categories such as good and bad, beautiful and ugly, gain and loss, right and wrong, and whether something aligns with or opposes their personal desires. Yanbo Zeng views values as deeply ingrained beliefs and viewpoints, reflecting the fundamental perspectives within a society that distinguish between virtue and vice, and provide judgments on the worth of things. Jie Shen suggests that values are the ideal cognitions, emotions, and intentions of societal members concerning social structures, operational dynamics, and cultural impacts. Chunli Zhao and colleagues contend that values encapsulate individuals’ attitudes and notions towards people and objects, serving as criteria for determining quality. Haiyan Gao and her team indicate that values manifest the intrinsic evaluations and judgments societal members make in their interrelationships. Matthias Kaiser asserts that values act as benchmarks for gauging the quality of things, often intertwining reason with emotion.

Upon conducting a comprehensive review and analysis of extant research in the field, we can refine the following viewpoint: Values are essentially the intrinsic cognitive framework that individuals construct based on their thought processes and sensory perceptions. This framework guides their behavioral patterns and value orientations.

## *2.2 The Uniqueness of Youth Values: Transitional States, Social Mirroring, and Cultural Tension*

The uniqueness of youth values lies in its complexity as a “transitional state”, which is both a phased product of individual growth and a microcosm of social and cultural changes.

Zhijian Huang identifies four distinct characteristics of youth values: the changes in these values due to varying age stages; a pronounced inclination towards conformity; their transient and mutable nature; and their inclination towards trend-following. Chunli Zhao and colleagues propose four attributes of youth values: the interdependence between value formation and self-identity establishment; the diversity of these values; the relative stability of individual values, influenced by factors like age and social status; and their evolution through conflict and adjustment. Zhongwen Guan emphasizes three core characteristics: the quest for self-identity, the transition from dependence to autonomy, and the pursuit of value resonance. Kaiser Matias posits that youth values demonstrate diversity across different social contexts and life phases, with variations in expression across cultural backgrounds.

Upon reviewing the research findings of pertinent scholars, it becomes evident that the shared traits of young people’s values can be synthesized into a few key points: 1) A strong emphasis on individual uniqueness and autonomy; 2) The prioritization of building and expanding social networks; 3) A dynamic evolution that parallels age growth.

## **3. Historical Mirror: The Co-Evolution of Popular Music and Youth Values**

Following the period of reform and opening-up, marked by increasing openness to the global community and a steady renewal of societal perspectives, popular music has experienced a significant transition from being perceived as ‘underground’ to becoming more ‘overground’. Its widespread appeal and trendy nature have made it particularly popular among the younger generation. Consequently, it has had a substantial impact on the value systems of young people, shaped by evolving artistic trends and societal shifts.

### *3.1 The Period of Enlightenment and Awakening Spanned from 1978 to 1986*

The initial phase of popular music development in mainland China transpired from the onset of reform and opening-up to the mid-to-late 1980s. Throughout this period, collectivist values prevailed, with the themes of popular songs frequently revolving around patriotism and the spirit of collectivism. On May 11, 1978, an article titled *Practice is the Sole Criterion for Testing Truth* was featured in the 60th issue of *Theoretical Trends* published by the CPC Central Party School. Simultaneously, the articles were reprinted in leading newspapers such as *GuangMing Daily*, *People’s Daily*, and *PLA Daily*, while the Xinhua News Agency disseminated it nationwide. The publication of the article precipitated a widespread discussion on the standards of truth, generating intense debate across China. This discourse profoundly unsettled the traditional value foundations of the youth and served as a significant intellectual precursor in Chinese history. It provided the theoretical groundwork for the convening of the Chinese eleventh CPC Central Committee Third Plenary Session.

The convening of the Chinese eleventh CPC Central Committee Third Plenary Session in December 1978 initiated an unparalleled social upheaval in China. Following this session, China transitioned its focus from class struggle to economic development, thereby embarking on a formidable quest for socialist modernization. Specifically, the ideological liberation facilitated the gradual melting of suppressed emotions amongst the youth. The profound social changes at the inception of the reform and opening-up compelled young people to critically

contemplate the disparities between societal and personal values. They also delved deeper into the relationship between individuals and society, exploring ways to harmonize personal and societal values. In this period, positioned at the cusp of significant social transformation, the ideologies of some young people began to evolve. The dismantling of traditional concepts and the formation of new ones resulted in a temporary void in the youth's value system, leaving their mental space akin to barren land. During this phase, the youth exhibited psychosocial characteristics that were an amalgamation of tradition and modernity. Despite their skeptical attitude towards the reforms, young people were predominantly filled with hope, with the seeds of their modern societal mentality beginning to germinate.

In 1980, a letter penned by Pan Xiao was featured in *China Youth*, titled *Why Is the Path of Life Getting Narrower and Narrower* (《人生的路呵，怎么越走越窄》). This epistle ignited a nationwide discourse on the values of life, with active participation from diverse youth demographics. Doubts such as “What is the purpose of life?” and “Where does the meaning of life lie?” mirrored the prevalent confusion and disorientation among the youth of that era. As a consequence, some began to liberate themselves from traditional ideological confines, engaging in deep contemplation on the essence of life during this discussion. In the context of the collision between Chinese and Western cultures, they reevaluated socialism and, in the nascent stages of reform and opening-up, honed their thoughts to redefine self-worth and the meaning of life. Through this debate, most young people developed a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between society, the collective, and the individual. They affirmed the legitimacy of personal development and individual interests while also recognizing that social and collective interests are foundational for individual growth. After Deng Xiaoping's inspection tour of Shenzhen in 1984, a wave of learning swept through China. The youth, as the vanguard of the era, began to adopt a self-centric value system that pursued personal interests, seeking a balance between individual and collective benefits. A 1984 survey report revealed that university students fervently endorsed an accumulative and creative philosophy of life, admired truth-seeking and collective-oriented life pursuits, and favored an ideal lifestyle characterized by moral integrity, collectivism and selflessness.

The process of reform and opening-up has facilitated young people's re-examination of the value of life. This generation, in their quest for personal growth and societal progress, have experienced a transformation in traditional value orientations. The continuous influx of foreign social trends has underscored the individuality of the youth. They have come to recognize the significance of concepts such as independence, freedom, and equality, leading to a gradual awakening of their sense of agency.

In the initial phase of reform and opening-up, the incremental liberalization of society and markets induced a transformation in public thought and perceptions. While not entirely liberated, the thematic focus of songwriting during this period transitioned from revolutionary propaganda to more lyrical content. Predominantly, songs emphasized themes of party adulation, national pride, and gratitude towards the populace. However, there was also a limited inclusion of melodies that explored personal affection, familial bonds, and friendships. For example, *A Toast-Song* (《祝酒歌》) encapsulated the jubilant sentiments of the populace following their victory over “Gang of Four”, fostering an environment of joy and positivity. Similarly, tracks like *Why Are the Flowers So Red* (《花儿为什么这样红》) and *Love for the Hometown* (《乡恋》) epitomized the lyrical shift of this era. Other compositions such as *Night of Military Port* (《军港之夜》), *There the Peach Blossom are in Full Bloom* (《在那桃花盛开的地方》), and *On the Hopeful Field* (《在希望的田野上》) celebrated the majesty of the homeland and the aspirations for a brighter future through enchanting melodies and vivid lyrics. As cultural offerings expanded, influences from movies and TV dramas became increasingly profound. Songs like *Our Life is Full of Sunshine* (《我们的生活充满阳光》), *Sister Seeking For Brother While Tear Sheds* (《妹妹找哥泪花流》) and *Velvet Flowers* (《绒花》), when used as soundtracks, not only elevated the artistic merit of the productions but also resonated with the audience by reflecting intense emotions both within the narratives and real life.

The penetration of music from Hong Kong and Taiwanese artists has significantly influenced the musical culture of the Mainland. Notably, songs such as Teresa Teng's *Stroll on the Way of Life* (《漫步人生路》) and *The Story of a Small Town* (《小城故事》), Ming Man Cheung's *My Chinese Heart* (《我的中国心》), and Frances Yip's *Shanghai Bund* (《上海滩》), characterized by their distinct artistic style and emotional depth, have resonated extensively with the youth of the Mainland, instigating trends of covers and original compositions. Beyond merely augmenting the Mainland's musical repertoire, these songs have had a profound impact on the ideologies of the younger generation, kindling their enthusiasm to explore prospective futures and pursue novel lifestyles.

However, the cultural landscape of popular music during this period exhibited complexity and tension. On the one hand, with the opening of cultural exchanges, the influx of Hong Kong and Taiwanese pop music exerted a profound influence on the mainland's musical ecosystem. Representative works such as *The Story of a Small Town*, *My Chinese Heart*, and *Shanghai Bund* — characterized by their soft, lyrical style — transcended the grand narrative framework of traditional revolutionary music, offering mainland audiences a novel aesthetic

experience. On the other hand, policy adjustments and the flexible adaptation of cultural management mechanisms created space for the emergence of original mainland music. Official cultural events such as the “Shanghai Spring” concert gradually incorporated elements of popular music, while the 1986 “International Year of Peace” concert featuring a hundred pop stars and its theme song *Fill the World with Love* (《让世界充满爱》) marked a breakthrough in the cultural legitimacy of pop music. Meanwhile, Choe Geon’s rock anthem *Nothing to My Name* (《一无所有》) articulated the collective anxieties of youth amid societal transformation through its musical language, serving as a mirror to prevailing social sentiments.

For young people, the acceptance of pop music represents a reconstruction of value order. Mainstream pop songs, such as *My Chinese Heart* uphold the emotional tone of collectivism, while indigenous Chinese songs, like those of the “Northwest wind” genre, underscore the conscious awareness of local culture. Concurrently, the consumerist aesthetics presented by Hong Kong and Taiwanese pop music inadvertently expedite the transition of youth from a collective-centric to an individual-centric consciousness. Through modifications in cultural management mechanisms, the authorities continually steer the aesthetic direction of mass pop music, thereby initiating a dynamic equilibrium between commercialism and nationalism within the pop music industry. The inherent tension between such regulation and compromise gradually shapes the transformation of youth values in the early stages of reform and opening-up. This reflects the complexity and diversity of the cultural ecology during this period of societal transformation.

### 3.2 The Period of Fission and Contention Spanned from 1987 to 1991

The mid-to-late 1980s marked China’s transition from a planned economy to a socialist market economy. The Chinese twelfth CPC Central Committee Third Plenary Session in 1984 stated that, on the basis of public ownership, the socialist economy is a planned commodity economy. As foreign social trends and cultural concepts continued to be introduced to China, faced with the proposal of new theories and the shock of social transformation, young people did not know where to turn. Without forming new values, they had psychological doubts, and social attitudes began to waver. They found it difficult to choose between returning to tradition and moving towards modernity, falling into confusion once again.

The 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 1987 systematically elaborated on the theory of the primary stage of socialism, proposing the basic line of the Communist Party of China, namely “One Central Task and Two Basic Points”. The incomplete synchronicity between the superstructure and economic base development led to many problems in the reform process. Excessive emphasis on economic development caused some young people to begin to value individual interests more than collective ones, blindly approving of Western culture and pursuing so-called freedom, equality, and democracy of the West as their own values. The values of youth began to shift from traditional to modern. The “Shekou Symposium” in 1988 sparked a major discussion about youth ideological work. Many local youths began to question authority and dared to express their views. The increasing boldness and changes in youth are mostly influenced by foreign cultures and trends. Some young people increasingly pursue material enjoyment, weakening traditional collective values. Individualism gradually became more severe, leading to utilitarianism, impatience, and confusion in their thinking. They no longer had time to contemplate what the correct values are and lacked the ability to discern right from wrong. As a result, these young people began to reflect on themselves, no longer as anxious and impetuous as before, and started to re-examine their own values. The revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 caused a low tide in socialism and communism. Faced with the turmoil in both domestic and international environments, some young people’s values changed again. They lost confidence in the country and the socialist path, choosing to distance themselves from politics. They began to think about how to improve their own and their families’ lives, and their thoughts once again became confused.

From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, Chinese pop music underwent a significant period of diversification and transformation. During this era, pop music not only exhibited a stylistic diversification but also a greater complexity in thematic expression. It served as a crucial cultural reflection of evolving youth values and societal changes. The integration of foreign cultures with local traditions fostered innovations in themes, lyrics, and melodies. Consequently, pop music emerged as a vital platform for young individuals to articulate emotions, express sentiments, and redefine their sense of self.

During this period, popular music gradually emanated from a singular ideological framework, adopting a more liberal and personalized approach to articulate the multifaceted reactions of youth to emotions, aspirations, and societal realities. Lyrical compositions such as *I Only Care About You* (《我只在乎你》) and *Pink Memories* (《粉红色的回忆》) depicted the unadulterated pursuit of personal emotions by the youth through nuanced emotional expressions. Conversely, motivational tracks like *My Future is Not a Dream* (《我的未来不是梦》) and *I Am Ugly, But I Am Gentle* (《我很丑,可是我很温柔》) resonated with the bewilderment and struggles of the youth amidst societal changes, yet maintained an optimistic and elevating tone. Concurrently, songs with public welfare themes, such as *Dedication of Love* (《爱的奉献》) encapsulated the unwavering responsibility

and commitment of the youth towards their homeland set against a backdrop of societal disarray, blending noble themes with soothing melodies. Collectively, these songs crafted a rich tapestry of emotional expression in popular music, mirroring both the youth's intense focus on individual emotional realms and their enduring dedication to social obligations.

During the specified period, popular music emerged as a significant cultural instrument for the younger generation to critique reality, challenge authority, and reconstruct their subjectivity. Rock music, exemplified by Choe Geon's *Rock 'n' Roll on the New Long March* (《新长征路上的摇滚》) encapsulated the youth's desire to question established authority and explore diverse values, characterized by a raw energy and defiant stance. This musical expression not only offered a deep commentary on societal realities but also served as a poignant call for personal identity affirmation. Concurrently, campus ballads such as *My Deskmate* (《同桌的你》) and *Love Birds* (《爱情鸟》) echoed the nostalgia of youth for more naive times and their growing disillusionment with society amidst modernization, presented through sentimental narratives. Statistical data indicated a decline in the prevalence of patriotic themes from 40% in the 1980s to less than 20% in the 1990s. Conversely, the proportion of emotionally-charged songs witnessed an upward trajectory. This transition underscores the younger generation's evolving value system, shifting from a collective family-nation identity to a more personal emotional realm. The industrialization of popular music witnessed a significant acceleration during this period, which fostered the growth of original music and the maturity of commercial operation mechanisms. The advent of MTV, the proliferation of karaoke, and the creation of music ranking systems have caused popular music to evolve from a solely auditory art form to a multi-dimensional sensory experience. In this context, the textual representation of popular music has diversified. On one hand, it offers a vast cultural landscape for the younger generation to explore their personal subjective value and construct a unique identity. On the other hand, its evolutionary trajectory mirrors the intricate alterations in the public's mental framework during this period of societal transformation.

In summary, the popular music of this era is deeply intertwined with and shaped by youthful values, encapsulating the intrinsic conflict and tension between the emergence of individual consciousness and the gradual decline of traditional community ethics amidst China's modernization process. This music not only serves as an outlet for young people to articulate emotions and express feelings, but also functions as a significant cultural tool for them to reshape their subjectivity and explore a range of values. The evolutionary trajectory of this music not only documents the psychic state of the youth demographic during this period of social transformation, but also offers a critical gateway to understanding alterations in contemporary social ideologies and cultural forms.

### 3.3 The Period of Multivariate and Regression Spanned from 1992 to 2011

In early 1992, under the severe domestic social situation, Deng Xiaoping inspected various places in southern China and issued a series of instructions during his visits, answering some major cognitive questions that had long plagued the people. Subsequently, the 14th National Congress of the Communist Party of China was successfully held, and China proposed the reform goal of establishing a socialist market economy. The establishment of this goal greatly promoted the ideological emancipation of the youth, broke the social mentality of confusion and hesitation confined in the hearts of the youth, and the youth began to germinate a modern social mentality adapted to the socialist market economy. The value pursuit of Chinese society gradually shifted from the spiritual to the material. Deng Xiaoping said: "As far as the relatively small number of advanced people is concerned, it won't matter too much if we neglect the principle of more pay for more work and fail to stress individual material benefits. But when it comes to the masses, that approach can only be used for a short time — it won't work in the long run." "It would be idealism to emphasize the spirit of sacrifice to the neglect of material benefit." Pursuing material benefits is common sense, but it is not easy to balance material and spiritual aspects. Some youths were gradually influenced by wrong values, developed negative values, conflicted with real life, and went against traditional values. In a few cases, relationships between individuals became less pure, and excellent values such as benevolence, integrity, and friendliness were gradually blurred by egoism, individualism, and utilitarianism.

However, the situation has seen improvement due to macro and micro regulation adopted by the state to control market resource allocation. This, when combined with cultural education and mainstream values directed at youth, has encouraged young people to explore means of realizing their self-worth. They have displayed an increased eagerness to understand China's national conditions and traditional Chinese culture. Consequently, several traditional values, such as trustworthiness, righteousness and profit, good and evil, have been reaffirmed in real life. As economic development continues and living standards improve, the basic needs of sustenance and clothing are fulfilled. In this environment, young people, positioned at the forefront of reform and opening-up, begin to contemplate their future and reflect on life in a calm and thoughtful manner. Hence, the values of young people diversify in response to rapidly changing social conditions.

The ongoing influx of foreign cultures has precipitated a transformation in the mechanisms of the music industry, leading to a diversified stage of development for popular songs. Such songs serve as an external expression of the internal world and culture of young people. Original songs from the mainland are experiencing a surge in popularity as the youth matures and shifts away from the fervent idolization of Hong Kong and Taiwanese songs that were prevalent in years past. Nevertheless, regardless of whether it is on the mainland or in Hong Kong and Taiwan, there is an increasing diversity in musical styles. For instance, there are lyrical songs such as *Love Is Like Tides* (《爱如潮水》) and *Too Softhearted* (《心太软》) which encapsulate the unrestrained emotional expression of youths. Conversely, there are powerful and majestic songs like *Tibetan Plateau* (《青藏高原》) and *Wish you Peace* (《祝你平安》) reflecting the youth's social and national concerns. Moreover, inspirational songs such as *Sailor* (《水手》) and *Sunshine Always Appears after Wind and Rain* (《阳光总在风雨后》) have encouraged many young people to cultivate resilience, seek silver linings in adversity, and realize the intrinsic value of life. During this period, songwriting has become increasingly aligned with the experiences of the general public. There is a noticeable uptick in songs that reflect familial themes and everyday life, thereby enabling easier resonance with a broader audience. Concurrently, there has been a marked improvement in creativity, leading to the production of a diverse range of songs across various styles. The lyrics of these songs are imbued with rich literary value and demonstrate an elevated level of appreciation, indicative of the advancements in the quality of music that mirror the progression of social culture. Such developments resonate more closely with the aesthetic values of young people in a rapidly changing society.

On July 1, 1997, with the playing of the national anthem of the People's Republic of China, the world was declared that the Chinese government had resumed the exercise of sovereignty over the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, and two years later, China resumed the exercise of sovereignty over Macau. The return of Hong Kong and Macau makes all Chinese people proud. As early as 1982, Deng Xiaoping put forward the great concept of "one country, two systems", which was finally put into practice in 1997 and has been continued to this day. China has increasingly entered the world stage and displayed a good image. Such an exciting event coincides with the arrival of the new century, and the 15th National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposed a new "three-step development strategy", which is of far-reaching significance. At this time, the calm hearts of the youth began to be restless, having greater confidence in the future, the motherland, and socialism, and the pluralistic values began to return to the mainstream. Since the reform and opening-up, China's economic strength growth level is obvious to all, and in many fields, it has the ability to participate in international division of labor and competition. Therefore, in 2001, China chose to join the World Trade Organization, conform to the trend of the times, actively integrate into economic globalization, and constantly show the responsibility of a big country in opening up to the outside world. Chinese youth not only become more open-minded and optimistic but also highly identify with the excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation. Moreover, they can also rationally distinguish and accept the influence brought by the exotic culture and social trends from the West. A comparative study on the social consciousness of youth in China, Japan, and South Korea in 2000 showed that compared with Japanese and South Korean youth, Chinese youth not only have a high sense of national identity but also have a relatively strong desire to contribute to the prosperity of the country.

In October 2001, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China promulgated the *Outline for the Implementation of Citizen Morality Construction*, which set forth corresponding requirements for citizens in different aspects of society and became a guiding benchmark for young people to establish mainstream values in the new century. In March 2006, Hu Jintao proposed the socialist concept of honor and disgrace, mainly encapsulated as "Eight Virtues and Eight Vices" to guide young people in establishing correct values, which has positively influenced the construction of socialist ideological and moral values and the development of a spiritual civilization. In October of the same year, Chinese 16th CPC Central Committee Sixth Plenary Session proposed the establishment of "socialist core value system". In the face of complex and severe international situations, the introduction of the socialist core value system is of great significance for young people to enhance national identity, cultural identity, and form scientifically correct mainstream values.

The 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, held in 2007, proposed the scientific outlook on development and new requirements for achieving the goal of building a moderately prosperous society. As reform and opening-up deepened, Chinese society developed steadily, economic strength continuously increased, and the values expressed in the language and behavior of the youth increasingly aligned with the socialist core value system. After the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008, young people from all over China voluntarily went to the disaster area to serve as volunteers, spontaneously donating money and goods to the affected area, demonstrating the social responsibility and commitment of the youth, and reflecting the reshaping of youth values. In the same year, the successful hosting of the Beijing Olympics once again pushed China onto the international stage. Chinese young athletes responded to the Olympic motto of "higher, faster, stronger" with outstanding achievements, and young volunteers embodied the spirit of volunteer service through their actions, indicating the gradual enhancement of the youth's sense of agency. More than 50% of university students believe that hosting

the Olympics has a significant positive impact on enhancing their personal feelings. The youth highly recognize the great achievements of reform and opening-up, highly respect the leadership position of the CPC and the various measures of the state, and their personal values are gradually aligning with mainstream societal values.

Since the late 1990s, Chinese pop music has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from nationalization to globalization and from emotional expression to value shaping. This evolution not only mirrors changes in societal culture but also reflects the dynamic shift in ideas and values among the younger generation. The return of Hong Kong to China in the late 1990s was a pivotal historical event that stirred national emotions. Songs such as *The Pearl of the Orient* (《东方之珠》) and *AD 1997* (《公元1997》) encapsulated the collective memory of national identity among the youth through artistic expressions. As the 21st century commenced, the widespread adoption of internet technology and the acceleration of globalization propelled Chinese pop music into a new era of diverse integration and innovative development. Online platforms increasingly became the primary medium for music dissemination. Internet songs like *Mouse love rice* (《老鼠爱大米》) rapidly gained popularity due to their grassroots and colloquial expressions, reflecting the younger generation's predilection for direct emotional expression and attention to life's nuances. Concurrently, the themes of pop music compositions have diversified, ranging from cross-cultural fusion pieces like *Nunchucks* (《双截棍》) to "Chinese style" songs such as *Blue and White Porcelain* (《青花瓷》) and *Chinese Herbal Manual* (《本草纲目》). These works, through their clever integration of traditional motifs with Western musical elements, have bolstered the younger generation's identification with Chinese culture and cultural confidence.

Pop music exhibits significant bidirectional influence characteristics when shaping the values of young people. On one hand, culturally rooted works subtly encourage positive value orientations in youth through artistic expression. For example, *Blue and White Porcelain* showcases the unique allure of traditional Chinese culture, bolstering the cultural confidence of the youth. Similarly, *Welcome To Beijing* (《北京欢迎你》), the theme song of the Beijing Olympics, promotes Chinese culture internationally, inspiring patriotic fervor in the younger generation. These works not only enrich the youth's spiritual world but also fortify their alignment with mainstream ideologies. Conversely, the commercialization and entertainment trends of pop music can exert negative impacts. Certain internet songs excessively promote materialism, individualism, and other adverse value orientations, potentially weakening some young people's ideals and sense of moral responsibility. For instance, some internet songs, with their simple language and fast-paced content, cater to the demands of a hectic social life, but they may dilute the youth's connection to traditional culture and their ability to make value judgments. Furthermore, historical nihilism and cultural extremism can exacerbate the crisis of cultural identity and shake the foundation of young people's values via the covert dissemination of music.

In response to the multifaceted influences of popular music, the Chinese government has pursued cultural governance in this domain through both policy guidance and technical supervision. On the one hand, it fosters the creation of works that exude positive energy, such as by adapting popular songs to patriotic themes in mainstream media and utilizing new media platforms to enhance dissemination efficacy. Conversely, it helps regulate the market environment, resists the proliferation of vulgar content, optimizes the creative ecosystem, and effectively mitigates the spread of undesirable culture via laws, regulations, and platform governance. These actions not only purify the popular music market but also create a more conducive cultural consumption environment for the younger generation. In essence, popular music, a significant component of contemporary social culture, serves both as an artistic reflection of societal changes and a profound shaper of youth values. Given the pervasiveness of internet technology and the deepening effects of globalization, the diverse integration and innovative evolution of popular music offer rich cultural experiences for the youth. However, its commercialization and entertainment-oriented trends also present potential value crises. Through strategic policy guidance and cultural governance, popular music can more effectively fulfill its cultural role and emerge as a pivotal force in promoting the ideological advancement and value formation of the younger generation.

### 3.4 The Period of Integration and Leadership Spanned from 2012 to Present

The rapid advancement of internet technology since 2012 has led to widespread digital information dissemination, significantly enhancing the quality of life. However, this development has also had a multifaceted impact on the youth population, who are still in the process of establishing stable values. The fragmented and emotional nature of online information, combined with the limitations of information security technology, has resulted in the spread of negative and irrational evaluations among the youth. This has sparked emotional reactions and social polarization. Consequently, the tension between the diversification trend of social values and mainstream ideologies has become increasingly apparent. When confronted with complex information, the youth population tends to exhibit cognitive polarization and behavioral imbalance. To address this challenge, the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposed socialist core values in 2012. These values, encapsulated in a 24-word framework at the national, societal, and individual levels, systematically address the requirements of modern society's value construction. This framework, characterized by its simplicity and

systematic nature, provides clear value guidance for the youth, signifying China's theoretical maturity and deepened practice in the field of ideological construction.

While the introduction of socialist core values has fostered a positive societal atmosphere, there remains a need for increased dissemination and consistent oversight in individual behaviors. This is particularly evident among the younger demographic, where the internalization of these values necessitates a collaborative effort between education, culture, and social practice. In this regard, China has methodically facilitated the transition of core values from mere theoretical understanding to tangible behavioral practices via policy directives, cultural discourse, and institutional frameworks. Notably, the 2013 National Ideological and Theoretical Work Conference underscored the significance of the core value system. Subsequently, the report from the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2017 advocated for the integration of core values into various facets of societal progress, aiming for their transformation into emotional resonances and actionable habits. Such initiatives indicate that the propagation of core values transcends being merely an ideological endeavor; it is an intricate component of societal governance and cultural evolution.

In recent years, with the achievement of the comprehensive goal of building a moderately prosperous society in China, the historical milestone of the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the Communist Party of China, and the consecutive completion of the "three major events" in a new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics over the past decade, China's comprehensive development in economic, social, and cultural fields has provided a more stable value reference system for young people. The advancement of digital technology and the continuous improvement of the online ecosystem have enabled young people to demonstrate stronger discernment and cultural confidence when facing the impact of foreign cultures. In this context, the dissemination and practice of core values have become important paths for young people to shape social identity and realize self-worth. Through the multi-dimensional interaction of school education, family guidance, and social practice, young people gradually internalize core values as behavioral norms, demonstrating a higher level of social participation and responsibility.

In conclusion, since 2012, China's ideological practices have demonstrated that systematic value construction can effectively navigate the cognitive challenges presented by the digital era, offering consistent value guidance for its youth. The collaborative efforts of policy, culture, and education in disseminating core values not only foster social consensus but also provide insightful experiences for cultural identity and social integration within a globalized context. This underscores the significance of value construction in contemporary society and presents a reference framework for other countries facing similar circumstances.

Since 2012, the widespread adoption and proliferation of mass culture in China, particularly among youth, has garnered significant attention at the national level. Xi Jinping highlighted at a literary and artistic symposium that national spirit and cultural confidence are vital pillars in the ideological realm, and that the flourishing of Chinese culture is instrumental in realizing the goal of a strong cultural nation. In this context, popular music serves as an influential medium for mass literature and art, exhibiting characteristics of varied themes, inventive styles, and diverse audience demographics in its creation and dissemination. Creators focus on relatability, aligning their work with the lived experiences of the people, catering to the cultural requirements of different age groups, and producing works that resonate more deeply with the aesthetic and spiritual needs of the masses. This approach addresses the escalating cultural consumption demands of society. Concurrently, internet popular songs have swiftly gained popularity in the wake of rapid internet platform development; their widespread dissemination exerts considerable influence, particularly on the youth demographic who are in a formative stage of value formation. This trend underscores the need for more thorough investigation and research into the social functions and cultural values of internet popular songs as an emerging cultural phenomenon.

During this period, the proportion of patriotic theme songs and internet popular songs significantly increased, and the expressions were more innovative than before. Many works were presented in a folk style, and the lyrics shifted from straightforward expressions to implicit emotions, such as *Tender Lines* (《纸短情长》) and *Chengdu* (《成都》). Through delicate emotional expressions, they provided emotional support for the youth in fast-paced society, reflecting the contemporary youth's desire and pursuit for genuine emotions. Moreover, patriotic songs frequently appeared at major historical nodes of the country, becoming an important medium for uniting societal emotions. The cover and innovative adaptation of classic old songs became a trend, like the widespread singing of *My Motherland and I* (《我和我的祖国》) on the eve of The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, which successfully created a nationwide patriotic atmosphere. At the same time, emerging rap-styled patriotic songs like *Brilliant China* (《辉煌中国》) changed the public's traditional perception of rap music by transforming policy content into forms that young people enjoy. On the occasion of the centenary of the founding of the Communist Party, mainstream media rewrote and adapted popular internet songs to integrate them into grand narratives and the spirit of the times. For example, *Snow of My Youth* (《半生雪》) was adapted into a majestic patriotic song, *Parallel Space-time* (《错位时空》) expressed historical



inheritance through time-space dialogues, and *Starry Sea* (《星辰大海》) conveyed the power of the times with the theme of youthful struggle. These adapted works not only enhanced the cultural stature of popular music but also provided cultural resources for shaping the values of the youth through emotional resonance and artistic infection.

Overall, the burgeoning popular music scene in the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics has witnessed significant advancements in terms of quantity, innovation, and creative freedom. Its trajectory is overwhelmingly positive and upward. In terms of content, popular music is progressively aligning with core socialist values while satisfying the aesthetic needs and spiritual aspirations of the younger generation. Looking ahead, popular music, as a representative of mass literature and art, needs to further assert its role in the ideological field under state guidance, thereby providing robust support for the healthy development of youth culture.

#### **4. Practical Strategy: The Modern Trajectory of Popular Music Engagement in Shaping Youth Values**

Since the reform and opening-up, the development of Chinese youth's values has been intricately linked with the evolution of popular music within the cultural sphere of societal transformation. Together, they form a complex bilateral relationship between mainstream values and diverse cultures. The nurturing of youth values not only needs to be grounded in Marxism and socialist core values to maintain the stability and directionality of the value system but also requires a dynamic equilibrium amidst the openness of social thoughts and the multiplicity of cultural expressions. As the most pervasive cultural medium among the youth, the aesthetic orientation and value expression of popular music not only reflect societal changes but also serve as a significant tool for shaping youth values. The internalization of values is not solely dependent on the dispersal of cultural carriers; it demands the synergistic impact of educational guidance, social practice, and institutional guarantees. Through the seamless integration of policy guidance, cultural innovation, and social practice, the cultivation of youth values can transition from cognition to action. This builds a comprehensive, multi-level value-shaping system while adhering to the core of mainstream values.

##### *4.1 Adhere to the Guidance of Mainstream Values and Inclusively Coexist with Diverse Cultures*

The nurturing of young people's values ought to be grounded in Marxism and socialist core values, whilst concurrently embracing diverse cultural expressions. During the inception of reform and opening-up, young people contemplated the meaning of life in the "Pan Xiao discussion". This process, facilitated through collective social discussions and policy guidance, led to a nuanced comprehension of the relationship between individuals and society. Such a journey underscores the necessity of blending the guidance of mainstream values with the openness of societal thoughts. For instance, following the introduction of Hong Kong and Taiwanese music in the 1980s, authorities deftly navigated the influence of foreign culture and traditional collectivism via cultural management mechanisms. The resultant balance allowed for the proliferation of patriotic songs like *My Chinese Heart*, bolstering national identity, while also accommodating Choe Geon's rock music, providing an outlet for social emotions. In the contemporary era, the "three levels" framework of socialist core values seamlessly integrates traditional cultural resources such as justice and benefit concepts, and good and evil distinctions. Simultaneously, it employs the innovative medium of internet popular songs to appeal to the aesthetic preferences of the younger generation, achieving a dynamic equilibrium between mainstream values and varied expressions.

##### *4.2 "Infiltration-Style" Shaping of Values Through Cultural Carriers as a Medium*

Cultural vehicles like popular music play a pivotal role in shaping the values of young individuals. It is imperative to amplify the appeal of value education by leveraging innovative expressions. Take, for example, the 1990s campus folk song *My Deskmate* which conjures emotional resonance through its nostalgic narratives. Contemporary songs such as *Parallel Space-time* reinforce this through their time-space dialogues and revolutionary narratives. Research underscores that popular music has a profound impact on the younger generation via mechanisms like emotional catharsis and identity recognition. Songs like *Sailor* and *Sunshine Always Appears After Wind and Rain* motivate young people to push forward despite challenges. Consequently, there's an urgent need to stimulate the creation of works that amalgamate artistry with intellectual content — consider integrating traditional cultural elements into what one might term "Chinese style" music, or conveying policy content via rap. This approach metamorphoses value education from a mere didactic mode into a cultural experience that is actively cherished by young people.

##### *4.3 Strengthening the Internalization of Values by Building a Synergy Mechanism Between Institutions and Practices*

The process of shaping the values of young individuals necessitates a collaborative effort involving educational guidance, practical involvement, and institutional backing. At the educational level, it is imperative to meld Marxist theory with the contemporary needs of the younger generation. For instance, following the period of

reform and opening-up, the objective of nurturing a “New Generation with ‘Four Qualifications’” was employed to bolster ideals and convictions. In the contemporary era, theoretical understanding has been enriched through the interplay between ideological and political coursework and course-based ideological and political education. On a practical front, there is a need to establish platforms for societal engagement, such as the volunteer initiatives undertaken by youths during the Wenchuan earthquake or the Olympic volunteer services. These experiences allow young individuals to merge their personal sense of worth with societal value through acts of service. At the institutional level, there is a demand for enhanced policy support. In the modern age, legislative frameworks should be harnessed to counteract coarse culture, refine the online environment, and offer institutional aid for value cultivation. The combined impact of these three dimensions can catalyze the transformation of values from mere cognition to tangible action. A case in point is the recent affinity and active participation of the younger generation in the “Chinese Dream”, which is the outcome of an amalgamation of profound education, augmented practice, and fortified institutions.

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