

The “Great Master” and Music Idols: A Study on the Role of Popular Music in Shaping the Ideology and Morality of Youth

Liu Peng

Communication University of China, Nanjing, China

Abstract: As symbols of modern mass culture, popular music idols possess extensive social influence. Their conduct, discourse, and moral character are capable of subtly shaping the ideologies and values of the younger generation. From the perspective of higher education, positive idols play a significant role; their high-quality musical works and diverse social activities disseminate positive values such as peace and benevolence. Drawing upon the “Great Master” (*Da Xiansheng*) spirit advocated by the renowned educator Tao Xingzhi, this paper explores the relationship between idol culture and moral education. It argues for the integration of the “Great Master” didactic approach into idol culture to enhance the social responsibility of idols and foster a healthy cultural environment for youth development.

Keywords: Great Master (*Da Xiansheng*); Popular Music; Idol Culture; Social Morality; Moral Education

In the contemporary era, the resonance of popular music has become a dominant cultural force, playing an increasingly vital role in the lives of young people. It not only influences their cultural tastes but also subtly carves their values and moral outlook. The term “Great Master” (*Da Xiansheng*) traditionally refers to the esteemed educator and philosopher Tao Xingzhi. In this context, however, it broadly signifies those who serve as moral exemplars—parents, teachers, or social celebrities—who have historically been viewed as the primary forces in shaping the minds of the youth. Yet, in recent decades, with the rise of the “idol” phenomenon and the global dissemination of popular music, the moral and ideological influences on youth are no longer confined to traditional educators.

Tracing the historical definition of the “educator,” particularly Tao Xingzhi’s

philosophy of “Life is Education,” we find that education should not be confined to textbooks but resides in every facet of life. Tao argued that every event is a teaching moment and that morality is the core of human growth. Historically, the responsibility of the educator was rooted in teaching by both word and example—a principle that remains a cornerstone for modern pedagogy.

In the contemporary landscape of flourishing popular music, music idols exert a ubiquitous influence on adolescents. These idols convey ideas not only through their music but through their lifestyles, values, and public personas. As a medium of cultural transmission, popular music reaches global audiences instantaneously. In this process, music idols have transitioned from mere entertainers to role models—becoming, in the minds of many young people, a modern manifestation of the “Great Master.” Their attitudes toward life and social issues have profound implications for the youth.

However, Tao Xingzhi’s teachings suggest that the responsibility of moral education cannot be entirely replaced by popular culture icons. Tao’s education starts from lived experience, emphasizing social responsibility and moral consciousness. The essence of teaching lies in cultivating virtue, not just transmitting knowledge. True education empowers individuals to discern and critically analyze information—to “absorb the essence and discard the dregs.” Therefore, the influence of music idols must be subjected to critical analysis and integrated with traditional educational philosophies to provide the correct value orientation for the younger generation.

1. The Relationship Between Popular Music and Moral Education

1.1 The Social Influence of Popular Music Idols

Popular music idols are icons of modern mass culture and possess vast social influence ^[1].

Beyond the aesthetic appeal of their music, they influence the values of young people through their daily conduct, media exposure, and participation in social activities. Their behavior often becomes a blueprint for imitation by fans. Under the powerful influence of global pop cultures, an idol's actions can spark a widespread social ripple effect.

For instance, Michael Jackson, the “King of Pop,” advocated for world peace and environmental justice through songs like *Heal the World* and *Earth Song*. His music transcended racial and cultural boundaries, promoting global values of benevolence. In China, Jay Chou has innovated Mandopop while expressing positive values such as filial piety and integrity in works like *Listen to Your Mother* and *Dragon Fist*. Conversely, negative examples, such as the controversial anti-social imagery of certain performers, have sparked debates regarding adolescent rebellion and moral decline. Whether positive or negative, the social influence of music idols is profound and requires careful societal attention.

1.2 Comparing Music Idols with the “Great Master” Spirit

Tao Xingzhi’s “Great Master” spirit emphasizes that educators must possess a high sense of morality and responsibility, viewing the shaping of personality as their core mission. He advocated for “Life is Education,” suggesting that development occurs through the guidance of daily practice. In contrast, the influence of music idols often relies on short-term personal charisma and entertainment effects. This “high-frequency exposure” captures attention quickly through emotional resonance but often lacks the focus on long-term moral development. The influence of an idol is frequently more “transient” compared to the enduring, profound cultivation provided by a “Great Master”^[2].

1.3 Ideological and Moral Guidance in Popular Music

Tao Xingzhi’s goal was to cultivate well-rounded social citizens, a goal that intersects with the potential influence of idols. As the future leaders of society, young people must be guided toward virtuous actions. Tao proposed the “Five Educations” (Morality, Intelligence, Physicality, Aesthetics, and Labor). Similarly, pop idols can disseminate positive values regarding social ethics and collective

responsibility. If popular music idols can imbue their creations with social responsibility, they can become powerful instruments of moral education. This synergy aligns with the fundamental educational task in China of “Cultivating Virtue and Nurturing People” (*Lide Shuren*).

2. The Mechanism of Influence of Music Idols on Youth Ideology and Morality

Through the lenses of social learning^[3], cognitive theory, and behaviorism^[4], we can analyze how idols influence youth.

2.1 Social Learning Theory and the Idol Effect

According to social learning theory, individuals learn by observing others’ behaviors and their consequences. As high-visibility figures, idols are naturally emulated. When an idol’s behavior is socially praised, fans are more likely to adopt those behaviors as their own norms. If an idol transmits values of teamwork and perseverance, the impact is overwhelmingly positive.

2.2 Cognitive Theory in Idol Worship

Cognitive theory emphasizes how individuals process information to form judgments. Adolescents select and identify with certain idols based on their own developing values. This theory also explains “cognitive dissonance”: when an idol’s behavior contradicts a fan’s values, the fan may either adjust their cognition or change their behavior to maintain psychological consistency. This suggests that idols can prompt youth to re-evaluate their own worldviews and moral judgments.

2.3 Behaviorism and Imitation

Behaviorism suggests that behavior is shaped by environmental stimuli and rewards. When idols receive positive feedback (awards, fame, support) for their actions, it serves as a reinforcement for fans. Fans imitate idols to seek similar social validation. However, if negative behaviors are not explicitly punished, youth may perceive these as acceptable, leading to a degradation of social mores.

3. The Correlation Between Popular Music and Psychological Harmony

3.1 Psychological Impact of Music Idols

The impact is twofold: First, idols provide a

reference point for self-identity, helping youth construct their personalities. Second, idols meet specific emotional needs, acting as spiritual anchors. This emotional connection can alleviate the pressures of reality, which is of profound significance in adolescent development.

3.2 Humanistic Care and Psychological Counseling

Music has the power to comfort the soul. Many fans view their idols as spiritual supports. If an idol guides youth to face hardships with a positive mindset, it acts as a form of psychological healing. Music idols who use their influence to address social responsibility and care for the vulnerable can transcend the role of “entertainer” to become bridges for social edification and psychological guidance [5].

4. Constructing a Healthy Idol Culture to Promote Moral Development

4.1 Drawing on the “Great Master” Spirit to Elevate Idol Culture

The essence of the “Great Master” spirit is that educators must go beyond mere instruction to take up the mantle of moral enlightenment. Idols should not merely be “craftsmen of entertainment” but leaders of thought. They must consciously shoulder social responsibility and demonstrate noble character. If an idol’s conduct mirrors that of a “Great Master,” they can provide a positive demonstration effect that takes root in the hearts of the youth.

4.2 Constructing a Positive Environment for Idol Culture

A healthy culture requires multi-party collaboration:

No1 Idol Self-Regulation: Idols must improve their own moral cultivation and recognize their role as public exemplars.

No2 Media Responsibility: Platforms should prioritize positive values over sensationalism, promoting idols who exhibit social responsibility.

No3 Rational Fandom: Fans should be guided to support idols in a healthy, rational manner, using the “idol-fan” relationship as a catalyst for personal growth.

4.3 Integrating Idol Culture with Social Morality

As focal points of society, idols’ actions directly

reflect and influence public ethics. If idols embody justice, love, and loyalty, they guide society toward benevolence. Conversely, ethical lapses by idols damage the social fabric. Therefore, the behavior of an idol is not merely a personal matter but a fundamental issue of social morality [6].

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that idol culture is no longer a peripheral entertainment phenomenon but a core force shaping social atmosphere and youthful values. Positive idols can effectively guide youth toward healthy lives, while negative ones can jeopardize social morality. Society should place greater emphasis on the moral cultivation of idols. Educators at institutions like Communication University of China, Nanjing and beyond can utilize idol culture as a supplementary tool for moral education. Future research should explore how to more effectively integrate idol culture into formal school curriculums to achieve the goals of moral education in a globalized context.

Acknowledgments

This paper is supported by General Project of Philosophy and Social Sciences Research in Jiangsu Colleges and Universities. Project Number: 2025SJYB0445. Research Topic: A Study on the Cultural Value and Aesthetic Education Infiltration of Chinese Traditional Music Theory in "Mother Tongue Education"

References

- [1]Deng Xiquan. The new characteristics of current youth idol worship[J]. People's Forum, 2022, (19): 82-85.
- [2]White Chengming. A Comparative Study of Idol Worship and Role Model Education among College Students in the New Era[D]. Shaanxi University of Science and Technology, 2023. DOI:10.27290/d.cnki.gxbqc.2023.000073.
- [3]Feng Wenquan, Xu Dong. On Bandura's Ideas for Moral Education in Society [J]. Journal of Social Sciences, Hunan Normal University, 2006, (05): 126-129.
- [4]Yu Guoliang, Jin Juanjuan. Behaviorist studies on mental health issues[J]. Research on Higher Education in Heilongjiang, 2021, 39(03):136-140. DOI:10.19903/j.cnki.cn23-1074/g.2021.03. 024.
- [5]Zheng Yingjie. Exploring College Music

- General Courses Based on Aesthetic and Humanistic Literacy[J]. Exploring Higher Education, 2022 (06):60-64.
- [6]Song Min, Zhou Xingming. Research on Cultivating Social Responsibility among Contemporary College Students[J]. Education Review, 2014, (12): 92-94.