

COVID-19, “Moral Panic” and Cultural Power in Digital Age

YANG Dongli

Shandong University, Jinan, China

The outbreak of COVID-19 in late 2019 is still spreading all over the world. This sudden epidemic has not only led to a devastating disaster, but also triggered the psychological panic of all mankind. This psychological panic is mainly embodied at ontological level of life morality panic, and its essence is the panic which might end individual's hope for freedom. However, when ontological thinking of life morality comes to practical level, some digital narratives that pay too much attention to “user experience” will cause panic at the level of moral practice in audience, and then arouse populist feelings hidden in people. The increasingly updated digital technology not only enhances independent expression and communication ability of social individuals, but also leads to a gradually enlarged vicious circle between digital production mechanism and feelings of “moral panic populism”. The rational implementation of cultural power through digital media may appropriately solve this problem.

Keywords: COVID-19, moral panic, populism, digital narrative, cultural power

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 in late 2019 is still spreading wilfully around the world. This is the first global pandemic that mankind has encountered since the world was highly organized by digital media. The dependence of human society on connecting through Internet is highlighted in this pandemic. To some extent, this dependence is easy to cause psychological panic of human individuals in face of collective disasters, but it also provides an unprecedented opportunity for culture to actually implement power in real social life. Graham Murdoch once analyzed the populism, the inequality of job opportunities and treatment, and the tension between people and government caused by profit-seeking nature of digital media in the pandemic, and thus extended his criticism upon capitalist social system, but he did not talk about the role of intellectuals and culture in solving these social problems. Based on life philosophy of Chinese philosopher Liang Shuming and moral philosophy of German philosopher Kant, inspired by Wang Jie, the contemporary Marxist cultural aesthetician in China, this article attributes the root of these social problems mentioned by Murdoch to the panic of life morals caused by COVID-19. In analyzing and criticizing digital media as the initiator of making and expanding the panic, the author emphasizes the role of culture and its bearer—intellectuals in quelling the life moral panic and solving the social problems arising therefrom. On this basis, it explores the implementation path of cultural power in digital age.

COVID-19 and Moral Panic of Life

The outbreak of COVID-19 in late 2019 is still spreading wilfully around the world. COVID-19 has strong infectious power, fast transmission speed, and great toxicity. Almost everyone living in the world has gone

through the experience of “dying to live”. It can be said that this sudden epidemic has not only led to a devastating disaster in reality, but also triggered the psychological panic for all mankind. The more in the disaster, the cleaner people’s utilitarian desire is deprived, the more people’s non utilitarian feelings can appear. Therefore, in this epidemic, the psychological panic of social individuals is not only fear that their lives are threatened, but also confusion after examining life relationship between themselves and the others, as well as the worry about the fate of the whole world as a community of life. This kind of psychological panic is essentially a kind of moral panic, and it is a life moral panic at the ontological level.

Human life and morality are combined in the final analysis. Life is always presented as moral life, and morality can be realized only in the process of being related to life. The standard to judge whether a moral code is reasonable should be based on its significance to life, whether it causes the pain, barrenness, and degradation of life, or whether it stimulates the will, enrichment, and vitality of life. Morality should respect natural life. However, human natural life is different from animals. It is a social existence. His pain, barrenness, degeneration, will, enrichment, and vitality, all come from “humanized nature”, not natural nature. “Human feeling and human nature of feeling are produced due to the existence of its object and humanized nature” (Marx, 2018, p. 84). “The human essence of nature exists only for people in society” (Marx, 2018, p. 79). Even if some “nature” acts on people with appearance of natural nature, it is still “humanized” in essence. For example, air pollution, global warming, vegetation reduction, and so on. These damages for human living conditions seem to come from nature. In fact, they are the result of human abuse of industrial technology and excessive exploitation of natural resources. This result is closely related to the disadvantages of production relations of industrial civilization. Human natural life can be said to be bred from the soil of social life. The relationship between people, specifically, the relationship between individuals, the relationship between individuals and groups, and the application, coordination, and transformation of these relationships by individuals and groups constitute the content of human natural life. It is in this sense that Liang Shuming also called man’s natural life ethical life. This is also the fundamental reason why human life and morality can be integrated.

Although ethical life is not the original nature, it is not isolated from the original nature, but interlinked:

in the biological world, there are thousands of changes, countless, and the reality comes from one source. It seems that this life is another life, it can be divided but not be divided in essence. To say “universal life” means that life is the one which has gone through all things in the universe. (Liang, 2011, p. 61)

The so-called “cosmic life” is not the concept of life ontology preset at logical level of concept of ethical life, but communication state in which human ethical life and other natural life can perceive, understand, coexist, and cooperate with each other. In fact, it contains a cognitive basis for human ethical life to nature. Since human ethical life and other natural life can always be in a state of blending with each other, people do not know the outside world purely rationally, but know the outside world with feelings. The emotional way of recognizing the outside world is intuition. Bergson believes that intuition can be closer to the essence of things than rationality. Intuition has “knowledge, feelings and meanings” (Liang, 2011, p. 88). The meaning of integration is generally not to meet people’s low-level material desires, but to meet people’s spiritual needs. Liang Shuming called the cognitive way catering to people’s low-level desires the way of mechanical tools. The way of mechanical tools only serves people’s material desire and is limited by it, which will limit the creation and growth of ethical life: “a mechanical tool loses its life nature and is inevitably separated from the

great life of the universe" (Liang, 2011, p. 61). Only through intuition can people better create and develop ethical life in line with their natural nature and realize their own life morality.

To realize life morality through intuition, we firstly need to stimulate our own life moral feelings. Moral feelings are necessary to form moral cognition, stimulating moral judgment and fulfill moral responsibility. The processes for forming moral cognition, stimulating moral behavior, and fulfilling moral responsibility all need participation for moral feelings. "Love of man is, accordingly, required by itself, in order to present the world as a beautiful moral whole in its full perfection, even if no account is taken of advantages (of happiness)" (Kant, 1991, p. 251). Moral feelings are not imposed by external forces, but are basic needs for human natural life. Human's natural life is ethical life. Continuous perception, understanding, coexistence, and cooperation with other natural life and other people are basic way for existence and embodiment of survival value for this life. "The purpose for benefiting others leads to heart of love; the purpose for harming others leads to heart of hatred; the purpose for self-interest leads to self love; the purpose for harming oneself leads to self hatred" (Wang, 2001, pp. 620-621). "Love", "hate", "self love", and "self hate" are moral feelings. Moral feelings are "the feeling of pleasure or displeasure, taking an interest in the action or its effect" (Kant, 1991, p. 201). This kind of happiness or unhappiness from psychological needs for human nature will lead to people's cognition and judgment for morality, and then guide people's moral practice. If there is no moral emotion, we will regard "a beautiful moral whole" (Kant, 1991, p. 251) from the world.

Secondly, the realization for life morality requires the construction of life moral cognition. Moral feelings and moral cognition coexist. Moral cognition that integrates moral feelings is moral imagination. John Dewey once explained moral imagination from two perspectives. These two kinds of moral imagination are "empathic projection" and "creatively tapping a situation's possibilities" (Fesmire, 2003, p. 65). Among them, "empathic projection" refers to "animating mold of moral judgment" (Fesmire, 2003, p. 65). In "empathic projection", we will sort out desires, interests, and anxieties of others, and internalize these feelings into ourselves. This can be called "compassion". However, sympathy "is necessary but not sufficient for moral judgment" (Fesmire, 2003, p. 65). Moral judgment also needs to "creatively tapping a situation's possibilities". Shelley once pointed out that imagination, rather than existing ethics, is the main tool of good. The imagination generated in cognitive, concrete, and contextual feelings, combined with practice, will produce ideographic objects (Fesmire, 2003, p. 65). To sum up, moral imagination includes not only empathy for other people's feelings, emotions, and situations, but also keen anticipation for possible consequences of potential behaviors to others, as well as imagination creation to break through limitations of real situations. Moral imagination is not a dogmatic adherence to the existing moral norms, but an understanding of existing moral norms combined with people's life experience. In a sense, moral imagination can help people form a keen connection between existing moral rules and specific life experience. This makes the moral cognition constructed through moral imagination become a real life moral cognition.

Thirdly, to realize life morality, we need to improve our own life moral judgment. Moral judgment is the confirmation for moral cognition. It is the process for determining moral and immoral behavior in specific situation. This is the thinking of "the thought of the objective validity or rationality of his maxim", according to Kant. Individuals need careful thinking and reasoning to form judgment, and use absolute command to find the morally correct thing, and then decide our actions (Kant, 1991, p. 2). However, this thinking and reasoning do not exclude the influence of feelings. It is still intuition in a sense. Thomas Hobbes pointed out that any object for anyone's desire is something that he can call good for his own reasons, and any object that anyone hates is

something that he can call evil for his own reasons (Zeng, 2006, p. 63). It is against human nature to understand moral judgment completely limited to individual interests and likes and dislikes, but it confirms the intuitive nature for moral judgment from the side. Man's natural nature exists in the communication with others and other things. Therefore, the moral purpose of man's life must be not only “for himself”, but also “for others”. In short, it is the “cosmic life” formed by mutual perception, understanding, coexistence, and cooperation between himself and others. Therefore, Kant's judgment for good behavior we ask and expect to do is the moral judgment for life in line with human nature. This judgment is not only the confirmation for moral cognition based on moral imagination, but also an intuitive judgment. Therefore, some scholars take moral judgment as moral intuitive judgment of behavior, which is also reasonable.

Finally, life needs moral self-improvement. Kant believes that moral practice is embodied in following and applying moral rules to deal with human relationships. The reality for moral practice is the transformation of judgment and requirements for moral subjects in reality. The judgment of moral subject is based on the judgment in favor of “cosmic life”, but when this judgment is implemented into external reality, it will be affected by specific situation for each individual. Moral judgment is “what should be done”, that is, the problem of “knowing”; while moral practice is “how to do”, that is, the problem of “doing”. Although moral practice will be affected by individual specific situations, it will still be restricted by moral judgment. However, only strictly according to the constraints for moral judgment cannot achieve the purpose of morality in reality. The moral subject also needs to grasp specific situation through intuition, that is, to flexibly and randomly grasp the varied intentions, feelings, and experiences of related people and things. On the basis of mastering specific situation, guided by moral judgment, guiding specific situation around you to transform into moral purpose of life conducive to “cosmic life”, only in this way can we realize the purpose for morality in reality. In the process of moral practice, it actually contains dialectical unity for individuality and universality. Among them, individuality is the specific existence situation for moral subject, which needs to be grasped through intuition; universality is the moral judgment for moral subject individual, which is conducive to “universal life”, and it also needs to be recognized through intuition. However, the levels of these two intuitions are different. The former is at the practical level, while the latter is at the ontological level. Through different levels of intuition, the moral subject can achieve the unity of reality and ideal, and make the moral subject obtain psychological freedom. In this sense, Kant also called moral practice “the positive concept of freedom” (Kant, 1991, p. 2).

However, human's practice for life morality is a gradual historical process. Confucius' “five out of ten, I aspire to learn, standing at thirty, knowing destiny at forty, being obedient at sixty, and following my heart at seventy, not exceeding the rules” (Confucius, the 20th Year of Jiaqing in the Qing Dynasty). It is the most intuitive description of this gradual historical process. The meaning of Confucius' remark is that people begin to study and think at the age of 15 and cannot practice morality until they are 30. After that, on the premise of hard study and thinking, they can improve the realm every 10 years, and cannot reach the free realm of unity of people and things until they are 70. This fully shows that obtaining freedom through life moral practice is a gradual and improving historical process, which cannot be achieved overnight. In this sense, freedom can be said to be the ultimate goal for life moral practice.

However, since the end of 2019, COVID-19 epidemic that swept the world had forced the practice of life morality to be forcibly terminated. The problem that the ultimate freedom for individual subjects may never be realized is directly placed in front of every individual in the world. Whether it is the cherishing for individual life, the choice of life relationship between oneself and others, or thinking the world as life community, it is a

kind of life moral practice, and its core involves ultimate freedom of individual subject. Life moral panic triggered by COVID-19, at ontological level, is actually the fear for individual's disillusionment for freedom of subject.

Digital Narrative and Moral Practice Panic for COVID-19 Event

Only special groups of people, such as COVID-19 patients and their families and medical staff, have direct and personal experience and feelings for COVID-19. Most people feel and understand the epidemic situation of COVID-19 coming from media's report and guidance for COVID-19 event. When the epidemic raged, moral feelings of “living to death” for each one in the world were actually based on the media's narration for COVID-19. In current era, when mobile terminal media occupies mainstream of communication, the media's narration of COVID-19 is mainly embodied in digital narration. Therefore, the paradigm of digital narrative can easily directly affect each one's life moral emotion, cognition, and judgment, and then affect these individuals' life moral practice in reality.

Digital narrative is different from the narrative paradigm of paper and is even different from traditional mass media. Digital narrative is supported by digital technology platform. The emergence and renewal of digital technology platform is result of gradual deepening for media industrialization, and also highlights the fact that digital media is controlled by industrial mechanism. This kind of control not only endows the production and communication of digital media with the system and form of capitalization and marketization, but also makes economic power be more deeply integrated into production process of content, form, and digital media. Digital narrative is precisely the form of digital media production content and the main link of production process, so it is bound to be affected by purpose of media economic profit. In pre-digital era, the profit of media economy mainly depends on media content, but in digital era, “user experience” has increasingly become an important factor affecting profit of media economy. The combination of advantages of technology, content, and service will actively promote the development and competition of mobile media production. This makes digital narration not only planning and creativity of simple content, but combination of advantages of digital technology, content, and marketing function. Therefore, digital narrative embodies four characteristics: First, the narrator has changed from a single manufacturer of text meaning to a meaning negotiator who can interact with the audience at any time. Secondly, the ways of receiving narrative content are more diverse. Digital narrators will narrate through a variety of modes, such as sensory experience, spatial practice, identity replacement, empathic experience, virtual memory, and so on. These models are generally combined through the specific design made by the narrator according to the purpose and situation of digital narration. Thirdly, the acceptance process of narrative content is simplified. In the pre-digital era, the narrator stimulates the audience's association of their own life experience through single symbol, making them produce perceptual experience and impulse. No matter how the narrative skills change, the narrative grammar is relatively fixed and framed. Digital narration can enrich the user experience, fully mobilize various narrative elements such as text, sound, light, and shadow, and provide multi-dimensional stereoscopic information. There are no complex narrative skills, and the narrative grammar is also open. The audience can grasp narrative content only through simple cognition of senses, without the rational and complex thinking of pre-digital era. Finally, the audience can understand the narrative content more freely. The audience's understanding perspective is provided and dominated by narrator in narrative activities in pre-digital era. Digital narrative tries to restore the audience's expelled senses and bodies as much as possible, endows the audience with full and

free perception and thinking as in nature, and makes it have a perspective with both personalization and empathy.

COVID-19 news can be classified into two main categories: The first is the COVID-19 pneumonia death incident and its related events. The second is the survival crisis caused by COVID-19. The digital narrator of the COVID-19 event is either the parties and relevant personnel of the event, or the official reporter of the network. No matter what kind of role, they will fully consider the “user experience”. They will fully mobilize various narrative elements such as text, live video, live audio, expression pack, and so on, select the most noticeable and touching details of the event, and use the open narrative framework to make the audience wholeheartedly feel the fatal threat of COVID-19 to the whole human being, and then immerse in the danger of coming. The COVID-19 event displayed through digital narration is far more than simply imagined (Ashder & Shao, 2003, p. 146), more diverse and complex (Ashder & Shao, 2003, p. 146). Then, they may interact with the audience in the comment area below the report in time, disclose the details not involved in the report, and involve the panic events related to the report; or ignore the audience’s speech and create a helpless and frightening situation.

The digital narrative of COVID-19 cannot make the audience really enter the scene of event, but it can provide a place and time for people to exchange their feelings caused by COVID-19 event. In this exchange, various values generated by the evaluation events will collide with each other, and some will even blend with each other to reach an agreement, and then form a kind of public opinion to guide a wider range of audiences’ views on COVID-19 event. This kind of communication and guidance will imperceptibly organize and construct the relationship between various audiences, which can be regarded as moral practice in a sense.

The moral practice bred in digital communication of COVID-19 event should have been intuitive practice of “the positive concept of freedom”. However, in reality, it has evolved into audience’s irrational pure emotional release to certain extent. This is related to the simple, free, unrestricted, and barrier-free acceptance mechanism provided by digital narrative of COVID-19 event for the audience due to its emphasis on user’s experience, and also related to purposeful and conscious emotional creation for some digital narrative of COVID-19 event. Compared with the media narrative in pre-digital era, the digital narrative is more deeply affected by profit-making purpose of media economy. In order to develop a broader market, it will even consciously stimulate the psychology of the audience, so as to increase consumer demand. Although the digital reports of some COVID-19 events are aimed at major events that threaten the survival of all mankind, it has not got rid of this nature. The digital narrative of these COVID-19 events will use more pluralistic and more infectious narrative elements to describe the selected event details, so that the audience can get an immersive sense of the scene. This actually provides what Emmanuel Levinas calls the “face” of the event to a certain extent. “In the face, the existent par excellence presents itself. And the whole body—a hand or a curve of the shoulder—can express as the face” (Levinas & Lingis, 1969, p. 262). The detail of the COVID-19 digital narrative is “a hand or a curve of the shoulder”. Through the “face” constructed by these details, the audience can touch and feel the overall existence of the COVID-19 event, but cannot accurately and clearly grasp the whole COVID-19 event, because the face “opens a depth, beginning from which a gaze can come to us from elsewhere—a gaze that is older and more distant than our own, upon which it comes, and weighs, and which it contradicts” (Marion & Stephen, 2007, p. 167). The audience knows nothing about the blank space of events other than “a hand or a curve of the shoulder”, which can only be supplemented by association. This association will generally extend to “the depth of opening at a gaze” under the hint of existing details, but there is no way

to be confirmed. The audience’s subconscious anxiety about the truth of the event is thus aroused. The aroused subconscious anxiety urges the audience to eagerly look for reports of other relevant COVID-19 events to alleviate this anxiety. However, when receiving new relevant information, this anxiety is calmed down and new anxiety is produced, which delays the anxiety all the time. The joining of artificial intelligence technology in digital narration not only accelerates the delay of feelings, but also expands its scope. A certain kind of emotional industry chain with the nature of vicious circle cannot be intervened manually. If the emotional industry chain is transferred to a certain extent, the digital report of COVID-19 event will become an emotional industry for the audience to vent all kinds of emotions. In this way, the comments and exchanges on COVID-19 incident deviated from its moral practice essence of “the positive concept of freedom”, and evolved into an unreasonable release of various emotions accumulated daily, taking COVID-19 incident as a flood outlet.

The audience who unreasonably releases their feelings is mainly the people who feel the enormous pressure of survival under the threat of COVID-19. The living form of people in contemporary society is originally a “fragmented existence” (Wang, 2021, p. 126); “individualized existence forms a mobile cultural foundation” (Wang, 2021, p. 126). They are extremely eager to relieve emotional stress by releasing the negative emotions accumulated every day. The platform provided by mobile terminal digital technology not only strengthens the desire of each social group and individual to express personalized views, but also strengthens their ability to produce and disseminate information. Each group and individual can quickly and massively create and spread the meaning that can release emotions. The desire for emotional release makes this kind of audience have no time to take into account the life and moral connotation precipitated in the narrative depth of COVID-19 event. Their daily accumulation of hatred for the rich, anti-intellectual, and anarchic emotions are expressed by making unreasonable comments on COVID-19 incident, which has become populism in a sense. Of course, this kind of populism is not the moral practice “the positive concept of freedom”, but the exclusion and destruction of the real moral practice in the face of pseudo-freedom.

Populism in the wake of COVID-19’s digital narrative suggests that the practice of life morality in digital age has become a tool of technological control. This tool can be used to achieve the free purpose of life morality, and can also be used to seek political, economic, and cultural utility. On the surface, the technical manipulation and control of life moral practice makes the organization of social relations lively, but in fact, it destroys the real and effective management of social life, especially in the context of crisis. This is manifested as: Firstly, it solidifies the audience’s views on social life factors such as social class and social events, and makes the real and active social relations reduced to fragments and fragmented, so that people’s attention can be transferred to useless or even wrong meanings when COVID-19 is raging, but it fails to respond to the danger that may happen at any time. Secondly, it suppresses the pursuit of real freedom by life morality. Suppressing this psychological instinct is bound to promote the psychological dead instinct, strengthen the social aggression of the audience’s behavior and expression, and then cause serious damage to social order. The destruction will have worse consequences in context of social disaster and crisis. Populism around COVID-19’s digital narrative is proof. These two points reflect the fear of life moral practice in context of COVID-19.

“Moral Panic Populism” Cycle and Cultural Power in Digital Age

The digital narration of COVID-19 events detonated populism to a certain extent, and the digital production mechanism expanded the influence of populism. Digital production does not only include digital narration, but also a huge factory organization based on digital technology. This form of organization has an

unlimited pool of resources beyond imagination, fast-multi-dimensional and standardized manufacturing methods, viral and carpet transmission speed and methods, which can maximize the grab of economic interests. Without human intervention, the industrial cycle of digital production will run endlessly under the action of inertia. The industrial cycle of digital production has become a booster of “moral panic and populism” in COVID-19. In a sense, it has created a growing “moral panic populism” cycle.

In order to cut off cycle of “moral panic populism” and rebuild normal social life order among the populist audience, it is necessary to timely correct life moral practice generated in digital communication of COVID-19 event and make it return to “rational” practical nature of “the positive concept of freedom”. Specifically, it is to implement the power of culture according to the law of digital production and correct the deviation of life moral practice that is out of the right track in cycle of “moral panic populism”.

Culture has power. “Where culture meant a state or habit of the mind, or the body of intellectual and moral activities, it means now, also, a whole way of life” (Williams, 1960, pp. XVI-XVII). This “holistic lifestyle” provides model of life moral practice and gives meaning to people’s social behavior and social activities. This is the power of culture.

Culture has transformed our conception of power, which we used to think of in a rather crude and inductionist way. Instead of seeing power simply in terms of government or the military, it is everywhere, from the family and gender relations to sport and personal relationships. Our very identities and subjectivities are formed culturally. (Jacques & Hall, 1997, p. 25)

There are similarities and essential differences between cultural power and political power. What they have in common is that they can radiate their influence to every corner of social life through specific ways, and manage the radiation objects through this radiation way. However, the two are different in essence. Culture implements power by giving and depriving meanings, while politics implements power by giving and depriving rights.

Communication media constitute an important way to implement cultural power. In digital age, digital media is an important way to implement cultural power. How to effectively implement cultural power through digital media is a complex problem. Political ideology is used to managing social marginal consciousness through the incorporation of symbols. To some extent, this will make the representation of social marginal consciousness become the microphone of pure political ideology. Culture is different. It needs to ensure the freedom and independence of social marginal consciousness to a certain extent, but it should not deviate from the track of the normal order of social life. Therefore, many cultures will take the way of education and guidance, imperceptibly dispel the damage of social marginalization consciousness to the normal order of social life, and let it return to the right track in its own way.

The “populism—moral panic” surrounding COVID-19’s digital narrative belongs to the marginal consciousness of society and requires cultural education and guidance. To a large extent, this sense of social marginality stems from the audience’s vague understanding of COVID-19 event through digital narration. The vague understanding of the audience is the source of “populism moral panic”, but it can also be an opportunity to control “populism moral panic”. With the help of digital media, culture can make a deep and convincing explanation of the moral connotation of COVID-19 event, and guide the moral practice in digital communication of COVID-19 event to return to the intuitive practical nature of “the positive concept of freedom”. Specifically, this guidance is reflected in stimulating the normal feelings of the audience individuals on life morality, helping them construct a reasonable life moral imagination and cognition, so as to improve the

life moral judgment and enter the life moral practice of “the positive concept of freedom”. The opportunity of cultural guidance is to create a real life and moral situation with the help of the meaning production mechanism of digital media. It also needs to fully consider the “user experience” and fully mobilize narrative elements such as text, live video, live audio, expression package, etc. However, it appears in digital media more as a commentator than a reporter. Therefore, unlike the COVID-19 incident report, it needs to focus on two issues: Firstly, dispel the horrific atmosphere that some COVID-19 reports have deliberately created. Secondly, create a deep and convincing situation to explain the life morality of COVID-19 event. On the one hand, we should pay attention to maintaining the affinity with the current life of the audience; on the other hand, we should strive to present the real connotation of life morality. In a word, it is to dispel the horrible atmosphere created by some COVID-19 reports and excavate the moral connotation of life.

The main implementers of cultural guidance should be intellectuals. Intellectuals are not a fixed profession. “An intellectual is a person who is erudite and full of ideas: a person who loves ideas from his own point of view and can spread ideas particularly widely” (Melzer & Ziman, 2003, p. 4). His social power belongs to the category of “critical discourse culture”, which is uniquely between knowledge producers and knowledge disseminators. As long as they are knowledgeable and thoughtful and can consciously produce and disseminate ideas, they are all intellectuals, although some of them may not undertake actual education and scientific research work in colleges and universities or research institutions. However, the existence of intellectuals in reality is also very complex. This puts its cultural guidance in danger of going astray. This will exacerbate the cycle of “populism moral panic”.

In reality, intellectuals’ cultural guidance strategy is generally prone to three problems: firstly, be eager for success. Intellectuals are born with dual responsibilities: One is to establish legitimacy for a certain idea, and the other is to criticize a certain idea. When intellectuals implement cultural guidance, they not only need to deeply explain the connotation of life morality in COVID-19 incident, but also need to correct the populist understanding of COVID-19 incident. Some intellectuals are too eager to rebuild the life and moral order in “populism moral panic” in a short time, so they will use a large number of unpredictable professional terms and symbols when communicating with the audience. They tried to explain the moral connotation of life in COVID-19 incident and correct the populist understanding of COVID-19 incident through the cultural hegemony of technical authority. In fact, this is forcing audience to get rid of “populism moral panic”, which is divorced from original intention of cultural power, that is, imperceptibly making the audience consciously convinced of interpretation and correction of intellectuals. On the contrary, it will arouse the disgust and disappointment of audience, becoming the object of their attack, and then aggravating the cycle of “populism moral panic”.

Secondly, be kidnapped by industrial interests. In digital age, the relationship between digital information and material production is becoming closer and closer. Many material production needs to be carried out through information instructions, while many information needs to be realized through material production. This makes information manufacturing more and more important in social material production system. As a high-quality and valuable information producer, intellectuals will naturally face the temptation of incorporating industrial system in digital age. If they cannot resist this temptation, intellectuals may also weave business ideology into his “cultural guidance” for purpose of seeking their own economic interests. On the surface, such intellectuals seem to be conducting cultural guidance. In fact, they are replacing the meaning cycle of “populism moral panic” with another symbolic system with industrial interests. In this way, we can not only

fundamentally dispel the panic brought by some COVID-19 events to the audience, but also explain the moral connotation of these events, and even intensify the “populism—moral panic”.

Under the control of such business principles, the voices of heresy are constantly encouraged by capital and released. The more extreme they tend to be, the more they are encouraged by the market. They will win the so-called audience rating, clicking through rate and printing run, and turn them into real business profits through capitalist input-output accounting system. (Zhang, 2004, p. 72)

Thirdly, be assimilated by political management. The “populism moral panic” triggered by digital narrative of COVID-19 incident is obvious to all, and the government will not sit idly by. However, the strategies of government management and cultural management are essentially different. The government generally manages the participants of “populism moral panic” by formulating policies, laws, and norms. In addition, it will also use the way of political ideology symbols to control the stimulation for digital narrative symbols to audience’s psychology. Culture, on the other hand, adopts method of education and guidance to subtly dispel destructive effect of “populism moral panic”, so that the audience can return to normal order of society in their own way, and ensure the independence and freedom of these audiences to a certain extent. When intellectuals implement cultural guidance, if they cannot understand the difference between culture and real politics, it is easy to mistake political management, especially political management in the face of political ideology, as cultural management, which is assimilated by political management. In this way, the role of culture in “populism-moral panic” cannot be realized.

Conclusion

The guidance of culture cannot be eager for success, kidnapped by industrial interests, and assimilated by political management, but this does not mean that it does not need authority and is completely insulated from commercial and political factors. It needs to establish an affinity authority, give the audience in “populism—moral panic” a sense of psychological security, and win their trust and recognition. It also needs to fully consider the “user experience” and fully mobilize rich and attractive narrative elements to attract the audience. It also needs to follow the social life norms formulated by the government, and sometimes cooperate with policies and laws to deal with practical problems to a certain extent. If the guidance of culture completely excludes the establishment of self-authority, is insulated from commercial and political factors, and unilaterally pursues a pure cultural guidance, it has no attraction and appeal to the audience, and has no substantive effect on “populism moral panic”. However, while paying attention to establishing self-authority and combining with commercial and political factors, culture should also pay attention to maintaining its essence and original intention, that is, guiding the audience in “populism moral panic” to return to the intuitive practice of “the positive concept of freedom”, so as to prevent assimilation by hegemonic ideology, commercial and political ideology.

It is worth noting that cultural power can only function to a certain extent and be limited within a certain range in reality. Some feelings of “populism moral panic” are closely related to living state of the audience. Their living state does not change; only relying on cultural power cannot completely solve their emotional problems. However, there is no doubt that culture can dredge mood of “populism moral panic”, and even replace religion to a certain extent. As Mr. Liang Shuming said, “there is no theory of replacing religion with aesthetic education. It is common in ancient China, and it is also the social and cultural trend in the future” (Liang, 2011, p. 234). Religion “is all about the improvement of people’s character, depending on their

sincerity of conversion under the pretext of a belief object of transcendence and supremacy” (Liang, 2011, p. 233), playing a role in people from the inside out. And “in the future, human life will eventually be raised to a state of leisure and contentment in which the purpose and means are no longer separated, but the purpose and means are at anytime and anywhere” (Liang, 2011, pp. 233-234). This realm is “moral life without morality” (Liang, 2011, p. 234). That is, the realm of culture and the life of culture.

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