

Religious Aspects in the Mechanism of Asian Idol-Fan Pop Culture

Muzi Yan

REL 150

Professor Pierce

4/11/2019

Abstract

Kevin Schilbrack defines religion as an intersection between the features of functionalist and substantive, namely, 'the social practices authorized by reference to a superempirical reality'. Using Schilbrack's definition as framework, the essay aims at analyzing the idol-fan culture in Asia satisfies the functionalist standard of religion but fails to meet its substantive aspect.

The idol industry in Asia functions religiously in psychological and social perspectives: it benefits the practitioners psychologically by improving self-identification through the cultivation of idol-fan relationship; it also develops comradeship and community cooperation through fan-fan relationship. The consumption of idol-centered commodity strengthens the bonding between fan community, a similar mode with religious consumption. However, the appreciation is limited within the empirical factors of the idol (face, body, etc.). and nonempirical values (hard-working, talents, etc.). The absence of belief in superempirical being (independent from human, able to transcend the impermanent boundary) fails the idol culture to meet the substantive standard, thus cannot be categorized as religion under Schilbrack's definition.

Idol-fan industry was initiated in Japan in the 1980s and has been developed to a cultural phenomenon throughout Asian countries. The business model of the idol industry is composed of three major positively correlated factors, namely, the fan-idol relationship, the fan-fan relationship, and consumption of idol-centered commodities.¹ Entertainment corporates select talented and good-looking teenagers and train them with a series of classes such as singing and dancing. The harsh training period varies from three years to seven years with elimination system which ensures the formation of a promising idol group with qualified members. Then the companies maximize their profits through elaborate big-data analysis and marketing each idol group with unique style which targets on consumers of specific gender and age. The word fan stream (fen si liu 粉丝流) describes a mode of production and marketing of an idol group, or generally speaking an IP (intellectual property), by establishing and strengthening the idol-fan relationship, the fan-fan relationship to achieve maximum revenue from idol-centered commodities, during which the products and strategies are constantly refined based on the big-data feedback². Under four-decade development, the idol industry in Asia has been highly standardized and achieved enormous business success. S.M. entertainment, one of the three major idol companies in Korea, reported \$350.3 million annual revenue in 2015³. On Weibo, a Chinese idol Lu Han gained more than 100,252,605 comments under his post, breaking the Guinness World Record of the most

¹ Xiaodong Yue, *Worship and Fans: Uncover the Psychological Effects of Idol Worshiping* (Huazhangshumei: Mechanical Industry Press, 2012), p75

² Cong Wang, *The Economics of Korean Entertainment Industry* (Beijing: Zhongxin Press, 2015), p137

³ "SM Entertainment." Wikipedia. April 10, 2019. Accessed April 13, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SM_Entertainment.

replied online post⁴. A music video named *Kill This Love* by Blackpink, a K-pop girl idol group, was released on April 4th, 2019 and has gained 177 million views on YouTube within a week⁵. The enormous cultural phenomenon has raised many discussions in Asian countries. The debate on whether the idol-fan culture can be considered as a religion is heated especially in China since most generations under 30 have been raised under atheistic policies. Kevin Schilbrack defines religion as the intersection between functionalist and substantive definition, namely, 'social practices authorized by reference to a superempirical reality'⁶. Using Schilbrack's definition as framework, the essay aims at discussing how the idol-fan culture in Asia satisfies the functionalist standards of religion but fails to meet the substantive aspect. In other words, the business mechanism of idol industry functions religiously in psychological and social perspectives, but it should not be counted as a religion because the absence of belief in superempirical beings.

The fan-idol relationship established and strengthened through constant media exposure helps individual fan to build self-identification and increase confidence, which corresponds to the psychological aspect of functionalist definition that religion helps manage emotional energies and integrate identity.⁷ In an idol group, each member is assigned with a role based on capacity and with a memorable character

⁴ Rachel Swatman. "Chinese Popstar LuHan Sets Second World Record with Antler-wearing Fans in Beijing." Guinness World Records. March 29, 2016. Accessed April 13, 2019. <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/2016/3/chinese-popstar-luhan-sets-second-world-record-with-antler-wearing-fans-in-beijin-422528>.

⁵ BLACKPINK. "BLACKPINK - 'Kill This Love' M/V." YouTube. April 04, 2019. Accessed April 13, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2S24-y0Ij3Y>.

⁶ Kevin Schilbrack, "What Isn't Religion?" *The Journal of Religion* 93, no. 3 (2013): 313. doi:10.1086/670276.

⁷ Schilbrack, "What Isn't Religion?", 299

according to personality. Common roles are leading dancer, singer and rapper; and popular characters include charismatic, funny, 'swaggy', shy, etc. In public occasions, each group member must behave according to the assigned characters and engage in a half-natural and half-role-playing acting. Through observing idols, fans engage in self-identification process. Psychology research shows that fans with low self-esteem regard their favorite idols closer as the 'ideal self', while the fans with high self-esteem tend to consider their idols closer as the 'real self'⁸. Although some companies advertised their idol groups as 'idols accessible face to face' such as AKB48, in most cases, it is difficult for fans to have constant direct interaction with idols. However, the mass media and technologies enable fans to have various accesses to their idols without actual interaction. Moreover, entertainment companies spend years training the idols to talk and act to cameras to achieve the effect that they are communicating to fans directly and personally through the screens, which cultivates a parasocial relationship⁹ in which fans subconsciously recognize the interaction between them and the idols on TV as true. The unidirectional, non-contacting, and non-reciprocal parasocial relationship easily leads to the idealization of idols and romanticized worship from fans, described as remote intimacy¹⁰. Research indicates that for teenagers with low self-esteem and who cannot gain adequate immediate intimacy from families and friends, the development of remote intimacy from fan-idol relationship can boost their confidence¹¹.

⁸ Jaye Derrick, Gabriel Shira, and Tippin Brooke. "Parasocial Relationships and Self-discrepancies: Faux Relationships Have Benefits for Low Self-esteem Individuals." *Personal Relationships* 15, no. 2 (2008): 261-80

⁹ Elizabeth Perse and Rebecca Rubin, "Attribution in Social and Parasocial Relationships." *Communication Research* 16, no. 1 (1989): 59-77.

¹⁰ Yue, *Worship and Fan*, 104.

¹¹ Derrick, Shira, and Brooke, "Parasocial Relationships and Self-discrepancies":

Besides the psychological function of fan-idol relationship, the fan-fan relationship has social benefits-- the shared appreciation for an idol and the cooperative activities help to build and strengthen a fan community, which provides a cultural space for the marginalized individual to resist against dominant culture.¹² Each fan community for an idol group has an unique name, and fan communities of the popular idol groups are usually highly complex organizations with hierarchies and specialized sub-divisions. The higher management level of a fan, the better chance he or she has to meet the idol in person. Managers of the organization even have the right to punish fans who break the rules. The penalty includes eliminating the ID in the online forum and suspending the right to join the off-line fan meetings. In addition, the fan community has complicated ecology with various specializations. There are fans in charge of public relationship with other fan groups and non-fan public. Their job includes preaching the goodness of the idol on various social media, and “comment controlling”, posting positive comments under the news related to the idol to maintain the fame. There are other fans in charge of financial management, collecting donations from public to purchase items such as gifts for idols and idol-centered commodities. For instance, in 2016, the fan’s financial department of TFBoys, a boy idol group in China, collected and spent around \$7 million to celebrate the 17th birthday of Wang Junkai, a member of the group, including renting a LED billboard in the Time Square for five days¹³. Some

¹² Jennifer Porter, "Implicit Religion in Popular Culture: The Religious Dimensions of Fan Communities." *Implicit Religion* 12, no. 3 (2010): 272.

¹³ Yaoti Ren, "Chinese Women Spend a Fortune Doting on Their Teenage Idol." *Global Times*. Accessed April 13, 2019. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1010010.shtml>.

scholars criticized the consumerism in fan culture because it reflects the capitalism in pop culture and lacks religious authenticity¹⁴. However, others argued that religious consumption has been a widespread phenomenon since ancient times, including the purchase of true cross in Christian church, the burnt sacrificial animals on altar fire in ancient Israeli tradition¹⁵, and golden neckless for a bride in a Hinduist wedding. Thus, consumerism does not jeopardize the religious authenticity of fan culture¹⁶. Overall, under the complex community ecology, fans develop a sense of comradeship through organizing activities in support of their idols and defending their cultural spaces on social media. The effect of fan-fan relationship satisfies the social aspect of functionalist definition of religion.

Although the idol-fan culture fits both the psychological and social functionalist definition of religion, it fails to meet the substantive standard which demands the belief in a superempirical existence, and thus locates in region 1 of Schilbrack's Venn diagram. There are two causes of idol appreciation¹⁷. One is rooted in attraction based on idol's physical appearance and talents. These qualities are counted as empirical realities since they can be seen, heard, or perceived in ways with technology¹⁸. The second type is the admiration of idol's inner qualities such hard-working, kind, and courageous. Although the presence of inner values raised the admiration to a nonempirical level, none of these

¹⁴ Gary Bouma, "Adam Possamai, Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-real Testament." *Australian Religion Studies Review* 20, no. 3 (2008): 49-52

¹⁵ William Gilders, "Sacrifice in Ancient Israel." *Sacrifice in Ancient Israel*. Accessed April 13, 2019. <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/related-articles/sacrifice-in-ancient-israel>.

¹⁶ Porter, *Implicit Religion in Popular Culture*, 275-276

¹⁷ Yue, *Worship and Fan*, 139

¹⁸ Schilbrack, "What Isn't Religion?", 312

qualities can exist independently from human and are unable to transcend the impermanent boundary.

In conclusion, the mechanism of idol-fan industry in Asia can benefit the practitioners in psychological perspectives by improving self-identification and confidence through the cultivation idol-fan relationship; it also helps to build comradeship and cooperative community through fan-fan relationship. Although being criticized for lacking religious authenticity, the consumption of idol-centered commodity strengthens the bonding between fan-idol and fan community, and creates a similar mode with other religious consumption. Despite the fact that idol-fan culture fits into the functionalist definition, it is not a religion because the appreciation is limited within the empirical factors such as physical beauty of the idol and nonempirical values such as hard-working. The absence of belief in superempirical being fails it to meet Schilbrack's substantive standard. Thus, the idol-fan culture in Asia functions religiously in psychological and social aspects, but it should not be defined as a religion.

Bibliography

Book

Wang, Cong. *The Economics of Korean Entertainment Industry*. Beijing: Zhongxin Press, 2015.

(王丛. 韩娱经济学. 北京: 中信出版社, 2015.)

Yue, Xiaodong. *Worship and Fans: Uncover the Psychological Effects of Idol Worshiping*. Huazhangshumei: Mechanical Industry Press, 2012.

(岳晓东. 追星与粉丝: 揭秘偶像崇拜中的心理效应. 华章数媒: 机械工业出版社, 2012.)

Journal

Bouma, Gary D. "Adam Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-real Testament*. Peter Lang, Brussels, 2005, Pp. 176, ISBN 109052012725 (pbk)." *Australian Religion Studies Review* 20, no. 3 (2008). doi:10.1558/arsr.v20i3.365.

Derrick, Jaye L., Shira Gabriel, and Brooke Tippin. "Parasocial Relationships and Self-discrepancies: Faux Relationships Have Benefits for Low Self-esteem Individuals." *Personal Relationships* 15, no. 2 (2008): 261-80. doi:10.1111/j.1475-6811.2008.00197.x.

Perse, Elizabeth M., and Rebecca B. Rubin. "Attribution in Social and Parasocial

Relationships." *Communication Research* 16, no. 1 (1989): 59-77.

doi:10.1177/009365089016001003.

Porter, Jennifer. "Implicit Religion in Popular Culture: The Religious Dimensions of Fan Communities." *Implicit Religion* 12, no. 3 (2010). doi:10.1558/imre.v12i3.271.

Schilbrack, Kevin. "What Isn't Religion?" *The Journal of Religion* 93, no. 3 (2013): 291-318. doi:10.1086/670276.

Website

Wikipedia. "SM Entertainment." April 10, 2019. Accessed April 13, 2019.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SM_Entertainment.

Swatman, Rachel. "Chinese Popstar LuHan Sets Second World Record with Antler-wearing Fans in Beijing." Guinness World Records. March 29, 2016. Accessed April 13, 2019.

<http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/2016/3/chinese-popstar-luhan-sets-second-world-record-with-antler-wearing-fans-in-beijin-422528>.

BLACKPINK. "BLACKPINK - 'Kill This Love' M/V." YouTube. April 04, 2019. Accessed April 13, 2019.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2S24-y0Ij3Y>.

Ren, Yaoti. "Chinese Women Spend a Fortune Doting on Their Teenage Idol." Global Times. Accessed April 13, 2019. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1010010.shtml>.

Gilders, William K. "Sacrifice in Ancient Israel." Sacrifice in Ancient Israel. Accessed April 13, 2019. <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/related-articles/sacrifice-in-ancient-israel>.