

The Subject and Time-space of Heroes - Analysis of “Lonely Warrior” from the Perspective of Media and Music-sociology

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Abstract: *Due to its popularity, “Lonely Warrior” has entered into the real world from the cyber world. Numerous cover versions display a mediated socio-cultural scene. The fever of “Lonely Warrior” therefore demonstrate the desire of pursuing self and freedom, which has been structured paradoxically. Some public figures - the others have been labeled as heroes, but netizens’ own imagination of heroism has developed into a form of nothingness online. This paper discovers that ‘Lonely Warrior’ has distinctive meanings and perceptions for different generations since media and communication technologies have completely altered the form and value of music and music life.*

Keywords: Lonely Warrior; Hero; Subject; Being; Media.

1. INTRODUCTION

At the 2025 CCTV Spring Festival Gala, Eason Chan and several Olympic champions performed a song familiar to Chinese audiences, “The Lone Warrior,” sparking a renewed surge in popularity, proving that the song retains its unique artistic value and cultural significance even after its peak in 2022. Whether as a musical work, a media text, or a hypertext within the hyper - reality world of Baudrillard (1994, 1998), “The Lone Warrior” has evolved countless facets due to its widespread popularity and influence. From the “virtual world” of the video game “League of Legends” and its animated spinoff “League of Legends: Two Cities” to the flesh-and-blood “real city-state,” from Riot Games in Los Angeles to Tencent Holdings, the Shenzhen-based company, which established its Asia-Pacific headquarters in Shanghai, and from adults with humble dreams, pragmatic forbearance, to energetic, outspoken teenagers, the numerous cover versions of the song showcase a mediated social and cultural landscape. Julien and Simiu (1994) pointed out that Lacan’s Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary resonate with Freud’s id, ego, and superego. So, in this social landscape, who is the hero standing in the light? What kind of light does this concept actually exist in, and in what realm? This indistinguishable existence of reality and illusion on new media platforms calls for a necessary rethinking. Extending from Weber’s (2014) and Adorno’s (2018) musical sociology to the present in 2025, what has changed is not only music’s past as a clearly defined cultural form, but more importantly, what kind of cultural form is music today, singular, plural, or hybrid? Does it still rely primarily on Weber’s rational foundational analysis, such as scale, tonality, and structure? How has the relationship between music, the macrocosm of society, and the microcosm of the individual been reshaped by the development and changes in media and communication technologies? These are the questions this article attempts to explore and answer.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE HEROIC “LONE BRAVE MAN”

Across all timescales and cultural contexts, heroes are a concrete figure and a cultural imaginary that is called upon, shaped, and worshipped. Whether it’s Houyi, the sun-shooting hero in Chinese mythology, or Harry Potter, the world’s most commercially valuable wizard hero (Berndt and Steveker, 2011), while folk culture deifies mortals, introspective self-contemplation has also become a popular form of inspiration—everyone is their own hero. In some ways, this development bears some resemblance to the trends in modern Chinese art following the reform and opening up. As Yi Ying (1991) noted, there is a shift from heroic odes to the ordinary world. Chen Jianxian (1994) believes that the rise of heroes in human society involves a process of shifting from nature to humans. These divine figures often confront nature or the gods and monsters that symbolize nature, ultimately becoming cultural heroes. This marks a significant turning point in the mythological world, placing humanity at the center of the mythical stage. Malinowski (1986) explained the importance of myth as a powerful cultural force in the life of primitive peoples and analyzed the practical effectiveness of myth in primitive culture in relation to beliefs, institutions, morals, rituals and people.

In all kinds of historical (mythological) stories, whether real, fictional, or a mixture of both, the brilliance of heroic individualism is often reflected in the immense sacrifices made for collectivism. Furthermore, the heroic masculinity of men sacrificing themselves to protect the cultural matrix that represents their female identity ultimately creates a heroic halo. Hua Mulan, the heroine familiar to the Chinese as “traveling thousands of miles to the battlefield, crossing mountains and rivers like flying,” the first thing she did upon returning home from her battles was to “take off my wartime robe, put on my old clothes, comb my hair by the window, and apply my makeup in front of the mirror.” Within the context of traditional patriarchy, the identity and symbolism of heroes were confined to the boudoir. The sacrifices and contributions made by British women in World War II were also overshadowed by the heroic brilliance of male generals (Duncan and Nuala, 2015). In war films, the roles, ideas and representations of women are undoubtedly not treated fairly and objectively by the cultural and creative industries (Ritzenhoff and Kazecki, eds. 2014). When Hollywood filmed *Mulan* (1998) and *Hua Mulan* (2009) from a Western perspective, this commercial re-creation of “trans-cultural intertextuality” brought more myths to the understanding of China, women, and heroes (Li, 2014). However, this did not prevent Hollywood commercial organizations from making huge profits from this female hero symbol and its peripheral products.

Heroes and heroism will not be lost in the dust as history progresses. Instead, they flourish, driven by the commercial interests of the cultural and creative industries. This is particularly true of the various heroes created and marketed by Hollywood, such as the fictional cowboy (Agnew, 2014) and the enduring artistic and commercial vitality of the *Alien* and *Star Wars* film series (Mackey-Kallis, 2001; Frankel, 2021). Thanks to the continuous advancement of computer technology in image processing, Marvel Comics and DC Comics have, in recent years, sold a vast catalog of heroic characters to the world through the cultural medium of film. Male heroes such as Superman, Batman, Iron Man, and Spider-Man, along with the embellishments of Wonder Woman and Catwoman, have formed a vast commercial alliance, forcefully exporting American-style (individual) heroism, militarism, and feminism layered with commercial value and sexualized culture (Cocca, 2020). Campbell (2016) concluded that Hollywood professionals, familiar with the scriptwriting methods of mythological psychology and the multifaceted hero, have sold a global trove of American cultural brothels, promoting personal awakening, self-discovery, and growth, through the creation and marketing of heroes of different styles and genders. They also package and sell so-called American human rights and democracy. Cultural hegemony and political hegemony have become the two sides of the same coin. Although heroism and global political issues are deeply intertwined (Kitchen and Mathers, eds. 2018). For example, powerful American politicians, such as Obama, have repeatedly won the Nobel Peace Prize. While Thornton (2005) superficially criticizes American presidents for combining heroism with terrorism, he uses the excuse of individual humanity and humanity to justify the global disasters they have caused. This shows that the concept, definition, type, and image of heroes do not exist in a “pure” objective sense. Instead, they are imagined, portrayed, manufactured, and even fabricated within the contexts of different historical periods, geographical spaces, and power hierarchies in human society.

While cultural globalization driven by Euro-American economic globalization certainly cannot achieve absolute cultural homogeneity, the time-space compression caused by the pressure from the global to the local, from the outside to the inside, and from the other to the self is clearly visible. Harvey explains time-space compression as processes that “sometimes radically alter the objective nature of space and time, and how we present the world to ourselves, in ways that are sometimes quite radical. I use the word ‘compression’ because the history of capitalism has been characterized by an acceleration of the pace of life, simultaneously overcoming spatial barriers, so that the world sometimes seems to collapse in on us” (1989:125).

In this context of cultural geography, the objective reality of center and periphery, of decompression and transformation, Chinese pop music is the result of global localization, as are video games and gaming culture, social media, and online social culture. In this sense, the hero celebrated in “The Lone Hero” is not entirely locally produced, but rather needs to be studied and analyzed within the context of global/local, online/real. In other words, this “hero” is a commercial product and a coexisting cultural landscape, a global-local encounter, a political, economic, and cultural interplay, where the distinction between self and other is indistinguishable.

“Enemy,” an English song by the American rock band Imagine Dragons, is another theme song for League of Legends: Two Cities. It was released internationally before “The Lone Warrior.” Its message of not fearing everyone or the entire world against me, and living for myself, resonates closely with the “Lone Warrior”’s solitary attitude. Riot Games, the production company of League of Legends, is a master at using music to express its ideas and promote its products, meticulously creating popular theme songs for each season of the game. Netizens have jokingly called Riot Games a music company that’s been delayed by video games. However, the two songs’ popularity in China is completely different. “The Lone Warrior” consistently tops the “Hot Songs” charts on QQ

Music and NetEase Cloud Music, garnering over 100,000 comments each. It has been used as background music in short videos on Douyin by over 2.78 million users, generating 4 billion views. Its influence has made League of Legends more widely known. With the endorsement of “League of Legends” and the reconstruction of texts in new media communication, the hero of “The Lone Warrior” is obviously no longer a simple character reference and virtual imagination. Its connotation is complexly constructed by the following six factors into a cultural phenomenon that is difficult to distinguish between reality and fiction and changes dynamically.

- Factor 1: Internet, virtual world vs. real society
- Factor 2: Country, American heroes vs. Chinese heroes
- Factor 3: Generational differences: adult heroes vs. child heroes
- Factor 4: Identity, Hero Object vs. Hero Subject
- Factor 5: Physical and Mental Freedom vs. Physical Freedom
- Factor 6: Media, Musical Text vs. Social Text

Supported by online media, the subject and object of heroes, fostered by a vast number of domestic and international participants, have fostered a “participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2006), which has created countless heroic portraits for this cultural phenomenon. This has driven the “lone hero” narrative to become a foundational text for imagining various heroic figures, both self-centered and others, and has been continuously adapted, recreated, and disseminated. On a micro level, the “lone hero” narrative serves as a form of self-encouragement for netizens. Liking, commenting, and cover songs present symbolic representations of self-identity and, under the media illusion, the fad of various internet celebrities, whose identities remain unclear. For example, a cover song by someone who resembles an idol trainee but claims to be a delivery driver. On a grander level, some netizens situate the definition of heroism within the current social context, incorporating real-world events into the reinterpretation of the lyrics of “lone hero” lyrics, clearly defining heroes as others worthy of praise and imbuing them with a clearer historical context.

An incomplete count of online re-creations of the term “lone hero” reveals a new spectrum of heroes, ranging from familiar individuals like Yuan Longping, Zhong Nanshan, and Zhang Guimei to medical workers fighting the epidemic, flood relief workers in Henan, firefighters and countless volunteers battling wildfires in Beibei, Chongqing, the 9th Corps of the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army during the Korean War, and PLA soldiers who died in the 2020 Sino-Indian border conflict. The heroic spirit is crystallized in the words of 18-year-old martyr Chen Xiangrong: “Pure love, only for China.” The term “lone hero” has been rewritten in various ways, transforming into solemn themes like “Valley Supporters” dedicated to Yuan Longping, “Anti-epidemic Fighters” fighting the epidemic, and versions like Lu Xun’s version and the Anti-Japanese Hero version. Unsurprisingly, it has also become the subject of online mockery and speculation, with seemingly deliberate attempts to attract traffic, including versions like “Singles,” “Forced Marriagers,” “Married People,” “Unemployed People,” “Home Buyers,” and “Tax Evaders.” The covers of the song by celebrity idols such as Tengger, Yang Kun, Rainie Yang, Angela Chang, Su Jianxin and Phoenix Legend on the Internet and variety shows all prove that the “lone hero” and the social interpretation of heroes have long been caught up in a media carnival.

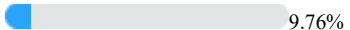
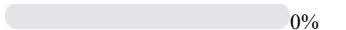
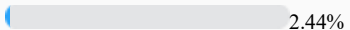
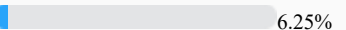
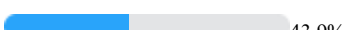
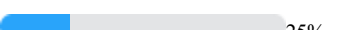
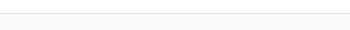
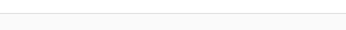
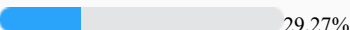
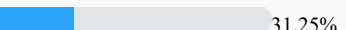


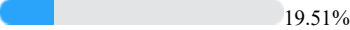
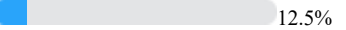
Precisely because this was a grand carnival, listeners and netizens of all ages and from all corners of the country participated in their own ways. To avoid the generalizations that might result from attempting to include all groups, this article will focus on urban youth, as it was, to a certain extent, the children’s song version of “The Lone Hero” that sparked this online frenzy of “creating” and “finding” heroes. Zhang Yashu (2022) summarized this phenomenon, arguing that three factors contributed to its popularity: the lyrics were highly evocative and imbued with life philosophy; the music was rooted in everyday life, evoking empathy among listeners; and the melodies were beautiful and appealing, making them easy to cover and spread. She also defined the three major social functions of pop music: reflecting social realities and reflecting the changing times; cultivating personal sentiments and establishing values; and disseminating cultural knowledge and inheriting excellent culture. In the absence of research, such arguments present a hollow and aimless narrative, offering a “jack-of-all-trades” interpretation of a hot social topic. In view of this, this study took 41 junior high school students from a middle school in Chengdu as the core research subjects, and 4 elementary school students, 16 college students and 1 actively participating adult as secondary research subjects. Through research paths such as questionnaires, on-site observations and parent interviews, primary data were collected to explore the social significance and cultural value of this heroic craze.

3. MEDIATED HEROIC LIGHT

In Adorno's analysis of music and media in the first half of the 20th century, one of the media objects was the radio, and he fiercely criticized the damage it caused to the artistry of music: "There is a group of people who, as people say, cannot concentrate but listen to radio music absent-mindedly. The scope of this group is still unknown; but from that scope a beam of light is projected onto the entire field. Thus, the comparison with drug addiction arises spontaneously." (2018:17) Adorno believes that "the division between mental labor and physical labor, the division between high art and vulgar art, and the defective socialization education... are the result of the fact that there can be no correct consciousness in a wrong society and the fact that the social response pattern to music is subject to wrong consciousness." (ibid.: 20) Adorno did not want to see this beam of light. His cultural elitism made him unable to accept the mediocre, stale and mechanical false emotions sold by the media. The concepts, motivations and meanings he enjoyed in serious music were a difference between autonomy and heteronomy. He despised the commercialized function of music in a society governed by the exchange principle, arguing that "in the functionless function, truth and ideology become entangled" (ibid.: 47). However, Adorno's demand for pure aesthetics in music could not be fulfilled within the industrial logic of political economy. Attali (1985) distinguished the development of (European) music from a political-economic perspective into four stages and modes: sacrifice, representation, repetition, and composition. Composition, in particular, emphasizes the musician's ability to compose music for his own pleasure, which resonates with Adorno's "functionless function." However, Adorno's resistance to the industrialization, mediatization, and socialization of (popular) music was remarkably strong, believing that music consumption by the untrained masses was "the poorest, the most insignificant... a prolonged carnival" (ibid.: 50). The metaphor of false emotion in music appreciation, such as "a poor old woman weeping at a stranger's wedding" (ibid.: 53), reveals an undisguised elitist arrogance. However, in contrast to those debatable arguments, Adorno's discussions decades ago on topics such as inner senses, the continuity of time, experience and the body still have special value in today's music sociological analysis. For example, the light he was wary of has become so bright and destructive under the blessing of network technology, and can even echo his criticism of "drug addiction". It's just that "Internet addiction" conspired by new media, AI technology and algorithms seems to have gained some kind of legitimacy around the world that technology changes life and technology makes life better.

The enormous influence of this convergence of smartphones, communication networks, and social media was further demonstrated during field research. During observations, a five-year-old kindergartener, allowed to play with her father's phone due to prior arrangements for the field research, expertly opened various apps to watch animations and listen to music. Within 20 minutes, she had begun playing "The Lone Brave" on one app, singing along with her head bobbing. The child's mother explained that she learned the song primarily because her kindergarten teacher played it in the classroom, and the teacher played it because she had seen a video of elementary school students singing "The Lone Brave" on TikTok. In other words, this child's initial emotional connection to "The Lone Brave" stemmed from the technological light of the internet and social media, which she had yet to fully grasp. The teacher and kindergarten were merely intermediaries that refracted this light.

Table 1: How did the respondents know the song "The Lone Brave Man"?

Options	Middle school student respondents	Proportion	College student respondents	Proportion
Parents at home play	4	 9.76%	0	 0%
School teacher plays	1	 2.44%	1	 6.25%
Classmates and friends play	18	 43.9%	4	 25%
League of Legends video game and League of Legends: Two Cities animated series	12	 29.27%	5	 31.25%
WeChat and QQ Moments	8	 19.51%	2	 12.5%
Tik Tok	twenty one	 51.22%	11	 68.75%
Station B (Bilibili)	16	 39.02%	9	 56.25%

Options	Middle school student respondents	Proportion	College student respondents	Proportion
Sina Weibo	7	17.07%	3	18.75%
other	8	19.51%	1	6.25%
Total number of people	41		16	

Field research with middle school and university students also confirmed that the heroic spirit of the “lone hero” stems primarily from Douyin, China’s most influential social entertainment platform. Whether Douyin and its music have truly driven the music scene both domestically and internationally is still undecided. However, amidst the US crackdown on TikTok, Niall Ferguson, a scholar at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, has already been quick to posit the fallacy that TikTok is China’s “opium” for retaliation against Western countries and demonstrates China’s “imperialist ambitions.”

This practice of attacking TikTok and then turning a blind eye to similar actions by American companies such as Facebook/ Metaverse cannot completely cover up its political motives, but it is worth reflecting on whether Douyin has indeed brought the Chinese people “the poorest, most insignificant... lasting carnival” (Adorno, 2018:50) and thus illuminated China’s cities and villages with its “addictive light”. On the one hand, TikTok’s emphasis on the core value of visual entertainment, “See the music, see you,” and its domineering attitude of “600 million lives need your music,” in its “Burning Galaxy,” have completely distorted the primary principle of music as auditory perception. The success stories of a few domestic and foreign singers, such as Jiao Maichi and Lil Nas X, cannot give TikTok the persuasiveness of innovative music. On the other hand, the musicians encountered during the field survey were full of resistance to this 15-second music fragmentation advertising practice. The statement “[TikTok Music] is not music” was repeatedly emphasized by different musicians, which seemed to echo Adorno’s old words: “It not only erases the quality differences of the music itself, but also erases the truth requirements of music.” (ibid.: 141) However, for middle school and college students who are listeners and netizens, whether TikTok has “invaded” and “corrupted” their cultural and spiritual life is difficult to consider from the perspective of “truth and ideology,” because this light has become like air, and they find it difficult to get rid of the need to breathe.

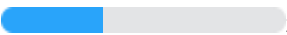
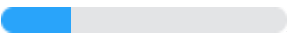
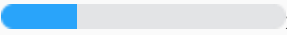

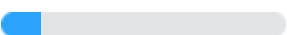
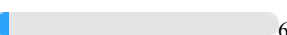
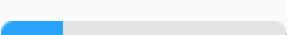
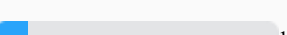
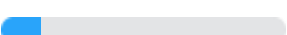
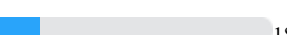
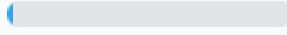
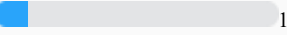

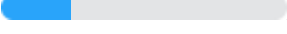
The second-ranked communication channel differs between the two groups. Among middle school students, real-life interactions between classmates and friends on campus can still influence each other’s cultural consumption. College students have long been actively engaged in online space, demonstrating a widespread affinity for online space and a disdain for the real world. Without parental control, an “on /offline” lifestyle has become a reality for college students. Only one student averages four hours of phone usage per day, while the majority spend six to eight hours, with a few spending as much as 12 hours. Smartphones, the media industry, and communication technologies have made the “cyborg” of science fiction a reality, and this “lone hero”-like freedom in the virtual world has gained even greater appeal and legitimacy during the pandemic.

Bilibili, the League of Legends video game, the League of Legends animated series, and Weibo were also crucial media outlets for the widespread dissemination of “The Lone Warrior,” each playing a different role in its transformation. However, they share similarities: ByteDance, Huandian, Tencent, and Sina are all technology-driven businesses oriented toward networking, digitalization, video, and social interaction. They each control billions of user data in their core markets, enabling them to create targeted commercial feeds and adjust business strategies and product development based on real-time user profiles. The popularity of “The Lone Warrior” is undoubtedly linked to the trending searches and push notifications of these companies. The light shone by “The Lone Warrior” across China was the digital light of a social app, illuminating real-life human emotions while also feeding into the spatial and temporal imagination of the online world.

While the fourfold structure of musical text —lyrics, sound, visuals, and social text—determines the success of music, and it’s far from being simply judged by lyrics, melody, arrangement, and vocal style, these companies have fundamentally transformed and replaced the textual structure and cultural value of pop music through their specialized “video” technologies. The embryonic form of music videos began to emerge in the late 1970s. The launch of MTV in the United States in 1981 significantly enriched the types and value of pop music’s visual texts. Stars like Michael Jackson and Madonna seized this opportunity for media innovation, using music videos to better

express the ideas and concepts embedded in their music and market themselves to the global market. Even so, music videos contribute to the essence of pop music. Whether the visual text represents a visual representation of the lyric text or offers a more innovative interpretation that departs from the lyric text, music videos and the original text of pop music share a relatively harmonious logical connection. However, the “videoization” methods used by these tech companies today often have nothing to do with music. Instead, they resemble what Jenkins (2006) called “transmedia storytelling,” using music as “background music” (BGM) for these app-based video programs, becoming a cheap, promotional sound effect, along with other awful and vulgar laughter and applause. Any musical work, including “The Lone Hero,” is forced to evolve into a symbol of identity, a spatial marker, and even a social currency with emotional value within online culture.

Table 2: What cultural activities related to “lone heroes” do the respondents participate in?

Options	Middle school student respondents	Proportion	College student respondents	Proportion
Sing “The Lone Brave Man” with classmates and friends	15	 36.59%	4	 25%
Playing with mobile phones, watching other people’s performances, and singing along	11	 26.83%	9	 56.25%
Sing along while watching League of Legends: War of the Two Cities	6	 14.63%	1	 6.25%
Singing “The Lone Brave Man” in school and on various occasions	9	 21.95%	2	 12.5%
Sing along with your favorite singers and stars	6	 14.63%	3	 18.75%
Post comments about “The Lone Warrior” on various social media	1	 2.44%	2	 12.5%
None of them participated	twenty three	 56.1%	4	 25%
Total number of people	41		16	

The limited data from the field survey already reveals the relationship between “lone heroes” and audiences of different ages, as well as the impact of smartphones on youth cultural life. Over half of the college students surveyed prefer to become “lone heroes” in the online world connected by smartphones. This is an inward-looking musical experience centered on self-imagination, and the “hero” is the emotional ups and downs of brain waves. While middle school students are also captured by the internet, with cell phone use regulated and less prone to the so-called “social anxiety” of college students, they are more willing to sing with classmates and friends. Although data from a middle school in Chengdu shows that over half of the students do not participate, a school teacher’s observations indicate that the majority do participate. Collective chorus singing is an outward-looking musical experience, with a stronger physical presence in physical spaces like school. The students’ arms around each other, bobbing their heads, and shouting are not simply “singing” but rather a way to “feel” the imagined “lone hero” with their bodies and minds, connecting it to their school life and leaving behind fond memories of “becoming” a “hero.”

A father of a six-year-old was perplexed by his son and his friends’ obsession with the song “The Lone Hero.” Based solely on his observations of his son, he offered a poignant summary, which he shared on WeChat Moments: “‘The Lone Hero’ is a song that awakens the inner strength of young children and is said to even alleviate temporary conflicts among them.” The precise psychological impact of this song on these kindergarteners cannot

be fully explained by the thoughtful words of adults. Adorno's view that "music's inherent tensions (tensions) are the unconscious manifestation of social tensions" (2018: 79) loses its explanatory significance in the presence of children. However, this father's observation crucially captures a (relative but crucial) difference between children's and adults' musical and bodily experiences: how does music affect listeners of different ages? And what do they become of music? Adorno's view that "music is realized in musical life, but musical life contradicts music" (ibid.: 141) seems to find some credence here.

This situation clearly reflects the profound impact of mediated social networking and the digital hegemony of IT companies on music and the musical experience. The music industry, in particular, is not only weak within the cultural and creative industries but has essentially lost its voice in the industry model of cross-cultural integration and production. It's no longer the music communities in a particular city that guide the direction of music culture; rather, it's the IT companies that invest in and produce the entertainment programs that leverage digital resources to influence which styles of music become popular and marketable, as exemplified by the recent hip-hop craze sparked by online variety shows. Field research among middle school and university students and musicians reveals that music (and consumption) culture in Chinese society today is increasingly oscillating between two extremes. Some insist on viewing music as both an artistic subject and a psychological backdrop, requiring immersion and physical and mental experience. Others use music as a social medium and a framework for identity, freely appropriating and adapting it in pursuit of internet celebrity status. Technology and its products, particularly the wireless noise-canceling headphones that have become a staple of young people's lives, have once again transformed the perceptual relationship between people and music.

Merleau-Ponty explores the meaning of music in several places in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, such as: "The reason why we always feel that language is more transparent than music is that most of the time we are immersed in a constructed language... In music, on the contrary, words are not presupposed, and meaning is linked to the experiential presentation of sound. This is why we feel that music is silent." (2001: 337-338) This view echoes the existentialist philosopher Kierkegaard's emphasis on the "immediacy" of music. He believes that "deep thought is inherent in language, so language cannot express intuition. Deep thought stifles intuition, so it is impossible to express music in language." (Quoted in Floros, 2012: 93) Merleau-Ponty also believed that the visible space of the bright concert hall is "incredibly interspersed with a 'dark space' in which other presentations become possible" for the hallucinator. (ibid.: 423) McLuhan's (1964) view that "media are extensions of the human body" was shocking and puzzling in the 1960s, leading to McLuhan being criticized as an "academic sorcerer". Merleau-Ponty explains the perception of phantom limbs from the perspective of the body as an object, analyzes the relationship between space, place, nerves, and cogito, and concludes that "the reason we can link 'physiological phenomena' and 'psychological phenomena' together is that when they return to existence, they are no longer divided into the categories of in-itself and for-itself, because they are both oriented towards an intentional pole, or towards a world." (ibid.: 181-182) Regardless of whether in-itself and for-itself can realize Hegel's freedom, Merleau-Ponty believes that "as a contemplative ego (Ego), I can distinguish myself from the world and objects very well, because I do not exist in the way of an object." (ibid.: 20)

Although Merleau-Ponty is known as the best interpreter of Husserl, when it comes to existence and existentialism, Heidegger's (1999) *Being and Time* and Sartre's (2007) *Being and Nothingness* are also important documents and theoretical concepts that cannot be avoided. The two have both similarities and differences in their understanding of existence. Wang Gancai believes that Heidegger's existence is aimed at "ontology", while Sartre's is "essence". "Sartre divides existence into 'existence in itself' and 'existence for itself'. The former refers to the kind of 'existence' that cannot be aware of, cannot comprehend, understand, or experience the meaning of its own existence, that is, objects or 'natural existence', which is equivalent to the 'existence' outside of Heidegger's 'Dasein'. 'Existence for itself' refers to the existence that can be aware of and comprehend the meaning of its own existence, and such 'existence' can only be 'human', which is completely consistent with Heidegger's 'Dasein'." (1999: 3) This article is certainly not intended to follow such important concepts and logic to explore philosophical subjectivity and morality, but believes that the "existence" of smartphones, media technology and communication networks has profoundly changed the perceptual relationship between people and music, and has redefined a certain type of music to a certain essential degree.

Stepping outside the logic and scope of existentialist philosophy, and without attempting to argue its philosophical implications from the perspective of music sociology, this article attempts to draw on Sartre's concepts of "for-itself" and "in-itself" to propose two perceptual tropes of music consumption, reflecting the fundamental changes in music wrought by media and communication: musical existence-for-itself and musical existence-in-itself. The former leans towards the pursuit of subjectivity. Music is a cultural intuition through which

the listener realizes and comprehends the meaning of their own existence, particularly through the free perception of the body, attempting to find a self-aware “I” in music. The latter, however, is trapped in the unknown of objectivity. Like other forms of entertainment, music is not used by listeners to understand and appreciate themselves, but rather to create what Neil Postman (2015) calls “amusing ourselves to death,” a cultural nihilism. However, on the surface, the latter still talks about the existence of an “I”. However, precisely because the vast majority of netizens rely on the existence of other simulated others in online social relationships to determine their individual bodies and collective identities, and likes, reposts and comments are digital and symbolic “symbolic exchanges” (Baudrillard, 1993), the result cannot be ruled out as the common “death” of the body and consciousness.

Even within this study’s limited fieldwork of 62 participants, two distinct types of participants emerged. College students preferred to wear headphones, enclosing themselves in a “solitary” space, preferring to interact online and developing a certain sense of pessimistic realism. At least during the interviews, they expressed a pragmatic attitude toward the heroic meaning of the “lone hero,” believing that “fairy tales are all lies.” For most of them, the “lone hero” was simply a sticker to display their identity as needed in online social activities. Controls on smartphones and headphones among elementary and middle school students intensified their experiential relationships between body and music, listening and action, and individual and group. Even if teachers and parents believed their youth and innocence prevented them from grasping the true meaning of the “lone hero,” they could not prevent them from pursuing their own sense of freedom. One eight-year-old elementary school student’s favorite lyrics were: “You love your tattered clothes, yet you dare to block fate’s gun... Will you go? Are you worthy? Wearing this ragged cape, will you fight? Fight! With the humblest of dreams...” When asked why, he explained that the lyrics captured his imagination of how ordinary people could become heroes. His parents were surprised by his understanding, but this was precisely the subjective consciousness and cultural imagination that fueled his pursuit of existential meaning at such a young age.



Figure 1: High-frequency word cloud of why respondents like “The Lone Hero”



Figure 2: High-frequency word cloud of the answers to the respondents' favorite words and phrases about “lone hero”



Figure 3: How do respondents understand the “light” in the lyrics of “The Lone Brave Man”? High-frequency word cloud of answers

These divergent answers demonstrate the students’ subjective consciousness and ability to think. However, considering the objective historical context and social environment in which the “lone hero” spread, this “light” is most likely “freedom” or “imagined freedom.” Sartre’s phrase “To be free is to be condemned to be free” (2011: 339), poetically translated as “Man is a prisoner of freedom,” and Merleau- Ponty’s statement that “Freedom is everywhere, or, one might say, nowhere” (2001: 805), both illuminate the relationship between self, existence, freedom, and society. Especially during this pandemic, the concepts of humanity and freedom have acquired greater dynamism and imagination, and cyberspace perfectly provides the “lone heroes” who aspire to be heroes with an endless void of freedom.

4. SOCIALIZED HEROIC SUBJECT

Did three years of pandemic control foster the heroic image of the “lone hero,” or is the heroic “lone hero” itself a true reflection of real society? Research has yielded mixed results, but it does suggest that, in addition to media-mediated shaping of the heroic subject, socialization is another significant force, transforming the imaginary video game heroes into concrete characters. Due to the immense cultural influence generated by the “Lone Hero,” fueled by social media, it has shown a clear trend toward pan-textualization. During the 2022 Dragon Boat Festival, some labeled Qu Yuan a “lone hero,” arguing that his spirit of “The world is turbid, I alone am clear; all are drunk, I alone am awake” and “The road is long and arduous, I will search high and low” resonates with the “lone hero,” who traversed the world alone and refused to compromise with fate. The most exciting and festive moment of a primary school in Chengdu’s 2022 Children’s Day gala was the school-wide chorus of “The Lone Hero.” The students sang at the top of their lungs, waving their glow sticks with all their might. It seemed as if they were truly transformed into the heroes of their dreams. Parents, weary of daily work and livelihoods but still required by the school to attend the gala, captured the passionate heroic spirit with their phones and shared them on their WeChat Moments, wondering why the “Lone Hero” was so courageous. Who are these children’s heroes?

Regarding the question of who is a hero and who is a hero, or rather, the object of who is a hero versus the subjective choice of who is a hero, we can see clear differences in the identification and imagination of heroes among respondents of different age groups. In this social carnival of heroes, the search for heroes, and becoming heroes, there is no temporary disruption of power structures or transgression of taboos, as Bakhtin (1941) described it, but rather a mere online frenzy, ultimately reflected through the media across different time periods, social classes, and generations in Chinese society, presenting a colorful yet difficult-to-distinguish face of heroes. On the one hand, the socialization of heroes tends to be oriented towards the broader social context, defining representative figures worthy of praise, such as public figures like Yuan Longping and Zhang Guimei. On the other hand, the socialization of heroes tends to be oriented towards the microcosm of personal life, with respondents selecting others in their daily lives who deserve praise. But what’s interesting is that in response to the question in the questionnaire - “Who is your hero?”, five respondents answered “myself”, but when asked why, the middle school and college students chose to remain silent.



Figure 4: High-frequency word cloud of the respondents' answers to the question "Who is the hero in their minds?"

Respondents' answers can be broadly categorized into three main categories: family members, occupations, and famous figures. The choice of parents and elders is a sign of respect and gratitude. One elementary school student interviewed acknowledged that their parents have sacrificed a great deal for their studies and life, and that they are heroes. Occupations like medical workers, border patrol officers, drug enforcement officers, firefighters, scientists, and teachers are associated with saving lives, defending the nation, and educating people. Even ordinary positions can make extraordinary contributions. Heroes from Chinese history and society, such as Zuo Zongtang, Mao Zedong, and Yuan Longping, were brought to the attention of students. Perhaps due to the Russo-Ukrainian War, Lenin was meaningfully mentioned as a hero. Sports stars Ma Long, Cristiano Ronaldo, and Yuzuru Hanyu were venerated as heroes. The only American hero mentioned was Iron Man, one of Marvel's iconic characters. From the words used by the interviewed students, such as "bringing glory to the country, national heroes, taking responsibility for justice, and ordinary greatness", we can feel that in this social context of great changes unseen in a century, the severe global epidemic, and the bloody and cruel war, heroes are the protectors of peace, harmony, security, and tranquility. In this sense, the imaginary "lone heroes" on the Internet have evolved into ordinary people around everyone in daily life.



Figure 5: High-frequency word cloud of respondents' answers about what kind of hero they want to be

This understanding was further exemplified by students' responses about what kind of hero they wanted to be. Aside from four students who offered personal perspectives—one aspiring to be Iron Man, one wanting to save Chinese football, one aspiring to be a proletarian revolutionary uniting the world, and one aspiring to travel and conquer all seven continents—the rest of the responses centered around the nation and society, expressing a desire to be an ordinary person who loves their country, challenges difficulties, contributes, is fearless, and self-disciplined. This is the common hero in the students' minds; the "lone hero" is not alone. However, from this perspective, the students' answers, especially those in elementary and middle schools, are still tinged with idealistic heroic imagery. College students, still on campus but already facing the realities of postgraduate entrance exams and job hunting, seem to have lost their heroic fantasies. In interviews with college students, many clearly stated that they do not aspire to be heroes, but rather hope for an ordinary, less stressful life in the future. The song "Lone Hero" serves as a way for them to express their emotions at this stage of life and at this juncture in time and space. The words of a classmate are very representative: "A hero is to be yourself, not cause trouble to society, and

live your own life well.” Going back to Sartre’s distinction between self and existence, if you can realize what kind of person you want to be, and while pursuing your own freedom, firmly adhere to the bottom line of morality, ethics and social responsibility, then this lonely and brave person may be your own hero.

5. CONCLUSION: THE NIHILISM AND REALITY OF HEROES

From the question of who the hero in the song is to who the hero of this society and this era is, “The Lone Hero” has achieved a transformation from a musical text to a social text. Perhaps, as Adorno (2018) argued, music and musical life are full of contradictions, but music and social life complement each other’s existence. Analyzing the social context of “The Lone Hero”’s success requires recognizing the “tragic” nature of the present moment, characterized by historical and temporal dimensions. After all, every moment and every day while singing “The Lone Hero” aloud, various “tragedies”—epidemics, wars, guns, work, and family—continue to occur. The loss of homes, property, and family members creates a greater need for emotional comfort, which, in turn, may be the very reason for singing, as the spirit of music can empower people. Nietzsche (2009) viewed music as “the symbolic language of the world” and “the voice of the world,” connecting it to the eternal and enduring will to life behind all phenomena. Nietzsche believed that music is a purely Dionysian art, emphasizing that true music is completely imageless, the primal pain itself and its primal echo, the formless and conceptless representation of primordial pain. Furthermore, in the Dionysian state, subjectivity completely disappears. In the thoughts of these great philosophers, music is an inseparable fact from human consciousness and existence.

While the impact of the pandemic on different individuals varies, the psychological impact and trauma caused by the three-year pandemic are still palpable today. Accumulated negative emotions need to be vented, and the pursuit of freedom through online media has become understandable. On the one hand, netizens enjoy the illusion of being heroes, actively participating in the media frenzy, but without the existence of a real heroic subject. On the other hand, netizens easily place their emotions on objects whose existence can be verified, such as Yuan Longping and Zhang Guimei, the “lone hero” lyricist Tang Tian, who has fought cancer for ten years, and the blind students at the Fuzhou School for the Blind who cannot see the light but have light in their hearts.

In this sense, from its explosive popularity during the epidemic to its unabated popularity in 2025, the core lyric of “Who says only those standing in the light are heroes” is somewhat inexplicably but wonderfully connected to Gu Cheng’s famous poem “A Generation”: “The night gave me black eyes, but I use them to look for light.” A generation of “lone heroes” in difficulties, confusion and predicaments, or at least some people who are unwilling to sink into nothingness, have to walk into this temporary “night” in this historical time and space and in the online media, in order to move towards the light and find their own heroic and free existence.

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