

Decoding Youth Buzzwords: “Transmutation” in Contemporary Ideologies and Marxist Perspective

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Abstract

With the advent of the new era, numerous social ideologies have surged, exerting significant influence on the value systems of the youth demographic. The phenomenon of “transmutation,” exemplified by popular youth slang such as “lying flat” and “involution,” is widely disseminated, reflecting underlying shifts in ideological values and raising concerns over the security of mainstream ideological consensus. The Party and the state prioritize guiding youth values, with General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasizing the importance of fostering correct ideological development during adolescence. It is urgent to critically analyze the genesis of these ideological trends from a theoretical standpoint. This paper adopts a Marxist perspective to critically examine the “transmutation” phenomenon, dissecting the mechanisms of semantic substitution, value preconditioning, and propagative fracturing, ultimately revealing the intrinsic nature of capitalist ideology. It proposes a holistic approach comprising de-commodification of concepts, discourse power contention, and innovative communication strategies. Through theoretical critique, this study aims to fill gaps in analyzing the material base of social relations, thereby clarifying ideological safeguards within pedagogical practice and youth ideological dissemination endeavors.

Keywords

transmutation, youth, internet buzzwords, ideology

1. Introduction

The ideological work concerning the Party and nation’s future and destiny is fundamentally tied to Marxism, which serves as both the banner and spiritual core of socialist ideology, as well as the foundational guiding principle for establishing the Party and the state. In the broader context of ideological development in the new era, reinforcing the Marxist ideological leadership is instrumental in safeguarding national cultural security and fostering the drive for national rejuvenation. However, the proliferation of online youth slang, characterized by humorous expressions and metaphoric dissemination, increasingly risks deconstructing mainstream values. It introduces negative ideological content through linguistic symbols, diminishes the influence of Marxist class analysis, obscures contradictions within production relations, and erodes young people’s value system. Against this backdrop, the study employs Marxist ideological critique theory to analyze the operational mechanisms and ideological essence of “metaphorical substitution” in youth slang, aiming to defend the dominant discourse authority and provide scientific support for ideological and political education to resist risks. Understanding the influences of diverse social ideologies, the infiltration of non-traditional values, and the critique of the socialist ideological essence of Marxism are necessary components for

stabilizing the ideological front. This research examines the critical theory of Marxist ideology and the functions of youth fashion in ideological transformation and value substitution, offering a scientific basis for the influence of mainstream discourse, ideology, and policies to prevent potential risks.

2. Formulation of the Issue

Currently, the internet has become the frontline battleground for ideological struggle. General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasizes the need to firmly maintain the Party's leadership over ideological work. In response to the impact of diverse social ideologies and the infiltration of non-mainstream values, it is an inevitable requirement to analyze the essence of social ideologies through a Marxist lens to strengthen ideological defenses. The report at the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China explicitly advocates "upholding the fundamental institutional role of Marxism in ideological fields and guiding with socialist core values."

The meaning of linguistic symbols is not fixed; its social evolution warrants close attention. As human society develops, language systems gradually form and evolve, further influenced by dissemination through digital media platforms. Many terms with initially shallow connotations have accumulated richer implications over time. For example, the term "lying flat" originally described the physical posture of lying down. However, with urbanization in China, "lying" has unconsciously become associated with rejecting competition. Some young people use "lying flat" to express a desire to escape increasing urban pressures and exhibit a low desire for material pursuits, imbuing it with a non-violent, non-cooperative form of resistance that gradually deconstructs traditional success narratives. In language use, "lying flat" has also developed new social functions, such as humor and self-deprecation, and has evolved to include meanings like "slacking off" (Yu, 2023) leading to derivatives such as "slacker-style studying" and "slacker-style dating" (Qiu and Ding, 2024) which humorously mitigate the pressures imposed by conventional success-oriented paradigms. Furthermore, the anthropological concept of "involution" spans various fields of expression. Originally denoting "agricultural involution," it has since been metaphorically linked to "ineffective competition." As society becomes more information-dense and higher education levels increase, density in the labor market rises, intensifying competition among individuals and making involution unavoidable. Particularly among the youth, this phenomenon prevails, as people are driven into a vicious cycle of competition in pursuit of diminishing marginal returns on capital, reflecting a broader societal trend of relentless internal competition.

The ideological shift within vocabulary often involves profound deviations from core values, and its impact is substantial. Transitioning from physical postures to narratives of passive resistance and struggle, the concept of "lying flat" gradually undermines socialist core values such as dedication and harmony. Through the dissemination of subcultures, it tacitly negates collectivism, implying a nihilistic tendency towards intrinsic values. The overgeneralization of the originally academic term "involution" reduces systemic contradictions to individual competition, misrepresenting Marxist analysis of the dialectic between productive forces and relations, and providing ideological space for neo-liberal individualism rooted in personalism-potentially disrupting the existing societal value framework.

This ideological drift is driven by the evolution of a new social thought dominated by capital logic, which infiltrates in three stages through a process akin to "Trojan horse" tactics: initially, symbol reconstruction - stripping "lying flat" and "involution" of their original contexts and reconfiguring them into emotional labels such as "refusing competition" or "ineffective efforts"; second, emotional sacralization-leveraging algorithmic dissemination to elevate these simple emotional labels into collective consensus, exemplified by "everyone is involuting," transforming systemic contradictions into collective anxiety; third, when "workpeople" self-deprecate broadly, bourgeois ideology seizes discourse authority via Gramsci's "war of position," dissolving class consciousness through individual narratives and effectuating value transfer.

This process triggers a dual crisis: concepts like "Buddha-like apathy" and "slacking off" foster "hedonism," causing workers to lose perception of alienated labor through humor, while at the societal level, "Confucian Porcelain" literature attributes educational difficulties to credentialism instead of capitalist monopoly-acting as an inverse operation of Althusser's "ideological state apparatus"-undermining the institutional foundation of collective values. Such infiltration seeks to erode youth's recognition of Marxist labor theory, thereby undermining Marxism's guiding role within the ideological sphere, highlighting the covert and long-term nature of ideological struggles.

The fundamental influence of this phenomenon triggers the “complexity of the new era ideological struggle and the urgency of guiding youth’s ideological development.” Currently, the internet has become the frontline of ideological conflict, with various social ideologies intertwining and clashing, making the risks and challenges in the ideological sphere increasingly complex. Since the youth demographic is mentally active and their value systems are in the process of formation, they are highly susceptible to infiltration and influence by non-mainstream ideological currents. As General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized, “Youth are the societal force leading the trend of public opinion,” and their value orientations determine the future direction of societal values. Therefore, effectively guiding youth’s ideological development is crucial for the continued vitality of the Party’s cause and the long-term stability of the nation. We must clearly recognize that the struggle in the ideological domain is not illusory but a fierce contest for hearts and minds, especially among young people. Given the frequent occurrence of “soft” ideological infiltration through online trending phrases, strengthening youth’s ideological guidance is both essential and urgent. We should thoroughly implement General Secretary Xi Jinping’s important directives on ideological work and youth engagement, uphold the Party’s leadership over ideological affairs, reinforce Marxism’s guiding position in ideological struggles, and steer youth development through socialist core values-cultivating a new generation committed to national rejuvenation.

To overcome these two limitations, it is urgent to adopt Marxist theory as the core framework, critically analyzing phenomena such as “transmutation tactics” from perspectives including contradictions between productive forces and relations of production, alienation theory, and class struggle, thereby identifying effective methods for addressing these issues. Based on Xi Jinping’s assertion in the report of the 20th National Congress to “consolidate and strengthen mainstream ideological discourse in the new era” and “enhance the cohesion and guidance of socialist ideology,” this research follows the approach of: first, selecting controversial and influential online trending phrases through platforms like China Youth Daily and annual hot word reports; second, establishing precise definitions and identification standards for the “transmutation tactics” phenomenon to ensure relevance in subsequent analysis; third, employing foundational theories such as Gramsci’s cultural hegemony and Althusser’s “ideological state apparatus” to critically examine the phenomenon from textual and ideological dimensions; and fourth, applying Marxist ideological critique theory to analyze the theoretical roots of the “transmutation tactics” hot word, summarizing and proposing pragmatic operational strategies.

3. Preliminary Theoretical Inquiry and Research Introduction

3.1 Initial Theoretical Exploration-Marxist Ideological Critique Framework

“Ideology,” derived from Greek, originally signifies “the doctrine of ideas.” The Marxist critique framework of ideology profoundly reveals that ideology is not a neutral, super-class collection of ideas but is intricately connected to specific socio-economic bases, reflecting the interests and demands of particular classes. This provides a fundamental theoretical tool for scientifically analyzing social currents. Marx pointed out that in a class society, ideology essentially constitutes the ruling class’s ideological system, functioning not only to interpret the existing world but also to maintain power structures and relations of production. This critical understanding enables us to look beyond linguistic surface phenomena and grasp the underlying operational mechanisms of ideology-such as how certain discourses employ semantic replacement and value preconditioning to subtly transmit non-mainstream values, thereby weakening the explanatory and guiding power of Marxist class analysis. The primary aim of Marxist ideological critique is to awaken class consciousness, reveal the concealed nature of productive relations, and lay the groundwork for constructing a discourse system truly belonging to the working class.

3.1.1 Fundamental Foundations of Marxist Ideological Theory Critique

In Marxist ideological theory, ideology reflects the economic base, depending on and shaped by the economic foundation, which determines its development. As the superstructure of thought, ideology exerts an active influence on the economic base. Various ideological forms, while engaged in struggles against contrasting ideologies, provide necessary theoretical support for the reflected economic base and political superstructure, ensuring the rationality of existing social realities and supplying essential ideological presuppositions and spiritual strength. Ideology functions to guide, educate, and regulate; when a society or

nation faces political goals and social values, the corresponding ideology serves as an effective tool-guiding the masses toward collective efforts to realize these goals and pursuits. Its guiding role influences public ideology and values, as well as behaviors through persuasion, education, and influence, thereby shaping broad consensus. The regulatory function involves using public opinion and evaluations to adjust or control thoughts and behaviors, effectively resolving social issues, modifying social relations, and alleviating social conflicts to pursue social order stability. Furthermore, ideology naturally constructs a political or social value outlook, uniting society members through a shared spiritual identity, fostering collective recognition of political and value objectives.

This theory provides a fundamental explanatory framework and support for the phenomenon of “metaphorical substitution.” Its core adaptability manifests across three dimensions: first, the class essentialism directly addresses the root cause of the phenomenon, as Marx revealed that “Ideology is the dominant class’s ideological system.” (Marx and Engels, 2006) while the semantic covert messaging of buzzwords like “factory worker” and “lying flat” actually signifies systematic erosion of class consciousness by capital-when wage labor is generalized comprehensively, the essential production relations of surplus value extraction become subtly obscured. Second, the relative autonomy of ideology deconstructs operational space; although ideology is constrained by the economic base, it can be reinterpreted via symbolic reconstruction, such as “involution” transforming from an academic term into a label for anxiety, thus elucidating how capital leverages internet buzzwords to achieve “flexible ideological dissemination.” Third, active reverse mechanisms expose hazards-such as “Buddhist resignation” diluting the ethics of striving, and “Kong Yiji literature” shifting educational critique-these serve as evidence of ideology’s counterreaction to the economic base, distorting value cognition and ultimately undermining the spiritual foundation of socialist labor principles. This adaptability necessitates employing Marxist theory as a fundamental analytical tool to dissect capital logic encapsulated within popular terminology.

3.1.2 Gramsci’s Theory of Cultural Hegemony

Regarding Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony, it posits that civil society functions as the arena for cultural leadership. Building upon Hegelian and Marxist foundations, it innovatively expands the definition of civil society to include the realms of culture, ethics, and ideology-diverging from the economic sphere-and considers these as coexisting within the superstructure of the state. Western bourgeoisie, wielding political power, also infiltrates mass consciousness with capitalist ideology in pursuit of cultural hegemony. Therefore, seizing cultural leadership becomes crucial for the ruling class to attain legitimacy and recognition from subordinate classes.

Gramsci advocates for the integration of manual and intellectual labor, asserting that “All people are intellectuals, but not everyone performs the functions of intellectuals within society.” (Gramsci, 2000) Those engaged in productive practice possess the attributes of intellectuals, yet their knowledge may not be actively utilized or displayed. Consequently, a distinction is made between traditional intellectuals and organic intellectuals-both are elite groups, but the latter represents new modes of production, embodies emerging ruling classes, and exhibits advanced qualities that differentiate them from ordinary masses. As the decisive force in praxis, organic intellectuals serve as ideological propagandists within civil society to secure “recognition” from the populace for the emerging ruling class, thereby facilitating the appropriation of cultural leadership and the maintenance of political power.

In light of the failures of international communist movements outside Russia, Gramsci concludes that due to the differing social structures of Eastern and Western societies, revolutionary strategies should be tailored accordingly-either a violent “militant” form of “guerrilla warfare” or a more insidious “positional warfare.” In economically underdeveloped Russia, where capitalism had not sufficiently matured and civil society was inadequately developed, the state of civil society cannot serve as a stabilizing force or provide a fortress-like defense for the regime. Therefore, the proletariat’s primary task would be to overthrow feudal rule. Conversely, in Western European countries, the bourgeoisie holds dual control over political and cultural spheres. Should the state falter, the stability of civil society would function as a defensive and supportive structure. Hence, a strategy of positional warfare-using organic intellectuals’ ideological dissemination-could enable the seizure of ideological leadership, laying a firm ideological groundwork for ultimately attaining political dominance.

3.1.3 Althusser's Theory of Ideological State Apparatuses

Marx's theory of the reproduction of production conditions encompasses two essential aspects: the reproduction of labor power and the reproduction of existing relations of production. Althusser emphasizes the former. The reproduction of labor power not only requires the reproduction of labor skills but also involves a reproduction of compliance with the existing social order, that is, workers' psychological submission to ruling ideologies, as well as the ability of agents of exploitation and oppression to manipulate these ruling ideologies effectively. This enables them to 'speak the language' of the ruling class and prepare for its domination." (Chen, 2003) His theory explores the specific role of ideology from the perspective of labor power reproduction, prompting reflections on self-identity construction, the educational functions of state and social institutions, and related issues.

Althusser directly inherits Gramsci's insightful understanding of the state and ideology, highly praising the originality of the state's internal structure, which, beyond the coercive political apparatus, includes a proportion of "civil society" organizations. He emphasizes that "not only must we distinguish between state power and the state apparatus, but we must also recognize another entity that explicitly favors (coercive) state machinery-what I refer to as the Ideological State Apparatus." (Chen, 2003).

Therefore, state power is executed through two types of state apparatuses and two modes of operation: repressive, coercive state machinery and the Ideological State Apparatus. Ideology appears to be a mild social regulatory tool but is, in reality, permeated with subtle forms of symbolic violence. He particularly emphasizes the roles of family and educational institutions, which significantly influence contemporary Western cultural theories and identity politics movements such as feminism and LGBT rights. Additionally, he provides material support for Western leftist ideological revolution through institutions like schools, utilizing education as a mechanism consciously designed to shape the ideological consciousness of the new generation of citizens.

3.2 Research Introduction

This study first synthesizes popular terms from multiple sources, including China Youth Daily, Red Book, and annual buzzword reports, to identify key concepts such as "working hard," "involution," "lying flat," "Buddha-like attitude," "Kong Yiji mindset," and "small-town exam takers" for subsequent analysis. Furthermore, "metaphorical transposition" is a covert mechanism of ideological infiltration within contemporary social currents. It often employs semantic reconstruction of language, gradual implantation of values and ideas, and innovative communication methods to subtly embed non-Marxist values into the public discourse system, thereby eroding the systemic coherence of mainstream ideology.

Based on a Marxist ideological framework, this study constructs identification criteria across three key dimensions:

Firstly, semantic displacement, which involves the political shifting of original and derived lexical meanings. Through manipulation of the core semantic boundaries of certain terms within specific political and cultural contexts, their connotations undergo systemic transformation, often diluting or negating their initial class associations. For example, the term "worker," originally referring to proletarians employed within bourgeois society for wages, has been generalized as a self-deprecating colloquialism across society-encompassing freelancers, employees, and even some managerial figures-thereby blurring the traditional class antagonisms between Employers and Capitalists. This semantic shift employs what Clifford Geertz termed "agricultural involution," describing a situation where, despite continuous labor input amid resource and technological constraints, productivity stagnates, and marginal gains diminish. Such semantic manipulations often serve to obscure the fundamental nature of relations of production, disguising exploitation as struggle and class contradiction as individual choice, aligning with bourgeois's ideological tendency towards "de-politicization."

Secondly, value presets refer to the implicit non-Marxist value orientations embedded in popular buzzwords. During their dissemination, metaphors, humor, and emotional resonance are used to subtly embed neoliberal, nihilist, and other ideologies, gradually eroding Marxist principles such as historical materialism and collectivism. For example, "lying flat" ostensibly signifies passive resistance to excessive competition but conceals nihilistic views on labor value, attributing structural workplace oppression entirely to individual desire, thus masking the alienation inherent in capitalist labor relations. Similarly, the term "Buddha-like

attitude”, with its connotation of detachment from desire, masks the social realities of class ossification aligned with neoliberal thought. These semantic distortions aim to dismantle narratives of labor liberation, distorting the concept of “alienated labor” into personal lifestyle choices, thus contravening Engels’ assertion that “labor creates man himself”.

The third aspect involves the propagation of ideological fragmentation: the deconstruction of Marxist discourse through fragmented dissemination. Utilizing media formats such as emoticons and short videos, complex societal contradictions are condensed into convenient, symbolic snippets that entertain the masses and remove contextual references, gradually undermining the integrity of the Marxist ideological system. For instance, when the “Post-2000s workplace reform” meme gained popularity online, conflicts between workers and employers were over-simplified as intergenerational disputes, with dramatized narratives of “post-2000s” youth resistance shifting attention from systemic issues like labor laws. In 2023, the “Kong Yiji Literature” trend emerged-where “long gown” symbolizes scholars, yet “standing while drinking” reflects economic hardship-netizens drew parallels between contemporary youth employment struggles and the constraints of the “long gown,” framing life and work difficulties as being shackled by traditional elitist symbols. These discussions often remain at the level of self-deprecating humor, effectively avoiding systemic critiques related to higher education’s industrialization and capital logic. Consequently, the phenomenon of “morphing” through dissemination often confines critical discourse to emotional catharsis, preventing it from escalating into structural reflections.

In summary, recognizing “morphing” entails delving from linguistic surface manifestations into the core of ideological hegemony, warning against the risks of “molecular-level invasion” of ideology, and promptly identifying the unique “flexible” infiltration characteristic of the digital age to expose its underlying mechanisms.

4. Dual Dimensions of Critical Discourse Analysis

Following the establishment of the three criteria for identifying the “co-optation” phenomenon, this study conducts a critical examination based on the current dissemination of youth-centric trending terminologies, analyzing both textual and ideological infiltration dimensions. The textual dimension focuses on the semantic evolution of linguistic symbols, employing Gramsci’s cultural hegemony theory to analyze how capital leverages the drifting signifiers of trending words to construct false communities, thereby undermining the hegemonic discourse underpinning class antagonism-essentially, the ruling class engaging in micro-practices of “territory battles” within civil society by utilizing non-violent mediums such as education and media to transform labor-capital conflicts into emotional resonance, exemplified by the national self-mockery” of “working people,” thereby hollowing out critical consciousness amid symbolic exuberance. The ideological dimension, grounded in Althusser’s theory of ideological state apparatuses, reveals how digital platforms serve as novel vectors-where algorithmic recommendation systems reinforce “filter bubbles,” immersing youth in depoliticized discursive spaces. The flow economy fosters the commodification of trending words, reducing Marxist class analysis to outdated labels; consumerism, through constructs like “twisted consumption,” reconstructs value systems, aligning alienated labor with lifestyle choices and constructing individuals as voluntary subjects of exploitation, or “consumers.”

4.1 Textual Dimension

The semantic reconstruction of youth-centric trending words fundamentally represents micro-practices of discursive power struggle. For example, the term “involution,” originally a structural contradiction identified by anthropologist Gluckman as the stagnation of productive forces due to rigid production relations, has been simplified in social media to a causality of “individual competition failure.” Similar phenomena recur in phrases such as “996 blessings” and the educational phenomenon of graduate entrance examination presenting characteristics of popularization and examination oriented, where systemic oppression is translated into narratives of personal capability deficits, stripping away Marx’s core critique of labor alienation-the appropriation of labor time by capital. Secondary creations within subcultural domains accelerate critical deconstruction further: when expressions like “Good morning! Working people” or “Corporate drones” circulate as memes and short videos, the opposition between wage labor and capital is transformed into comic emotional venting, drowned amid collective entertainment and trivialization of class conflicts.

Gramsci identified that ruling elites employ non-violent ideological infiltration to construct a “false community” perception system, thereby inducing the governed to voluntarily consent to their value system. The semantic evolution of youth-related buzzwords exemplifies this process: the term “working-class person,” initially referring specifically to proletarian laborers, has expanded into a symbol of nationwide self-mockery, implying a superficial equality encapsulated by the phrase “we are all workers,” thereby obscuring the fundamental class distinctions rooted in control of the means of production and undermining class narratives. Commercial capital further consolidates ideological hegemony through symbolic appropriation; for instance, the marketing of Huzhou Luzhou Laojiao’s “black lid” ties the act of “lying flat” to gaming terminology like “going dark,” transforming resistance to labor alienation into a consumerist symbol of “free choice.” Within subcultural circles, terms like “stealth pleasure” and “work fatigue” convert structural oppression into personal emotional labels. Gramsci regards such “emotional bargaining” as a strategy whereby the ruling class co-opts resistance at the grassroots level—when critique is trivialized into trending memes, its political potential is effectively drained.

The core of the textual dimension is the dialectical relationship between semantic politicization and the dilution of class consciousness. Buzzwords shift from academic contexts—such as the structural contradiction of “involution”—to mass communication, drifting towards individual competition narratives. This process strips away critical dimensions of production relations, thus exemplifying Gramsci’s notion of “positional warfare” in terms of linguistic practices—where ruling elites normalize ideology through everyday discourse. Youth endeavors to reconstruct positive connotations through terms like “sit-ups” (a redefinition of “lying flat”), yet without addressing systemic reform, this merely perpetuates the cycle of cultural hegemonic reproduction.

4.2 Ideological Dimension

Althusser posited that Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), such as education and media, facilitate the reproduction of production relations via non-violent means. Youth buzzwords have become a new vector within the digital age ISA. Their operation manifests a triad of ideological manipulations: first, postmodern nihilism deconstructs totality, simplifying social contradictions—such as those inherent in “involution”—into technical issues like algorithms and efficiency, thus avoiding fundamental conflicts rooted in ownership of means of production and distribution inequities. The fragmented nature of short-video dissemination further hampers cognition—examples like “Kong Yiji literature” are used self-deprecatingly around credential devaluation but fail to challenge the capital logic underpinning higher education industrialization, thereby dissolving the Marxist dialectic of “productive forces” versus “relations of production.” Second, consumerism reconstructs subjectivity; Generation Z’s “sneaker craze” elevates subcultural symbols into nationwide consumption festivals, where manufactured scarcity and limited edition tactics transform resistance-oriented community culture into tools for value enhancement. The “Guochao Hanfu” movement packages cultural identity as commodities, fostering an illusory sense of belonging among youth purchasing “Chinoiserie” apparel, concealing state appropriation of ethnic symbols. Althusser’s “interpellation” mechanism is highly relevant here: algorithmic recommendations continually reinforce the logic that “consumption equals recognition,” positioning youth more as “consumers” than “workers.” Lastly, the infiltration of historical nihilism, exemplified by AI-generated short videos reinterpreting history under the guise of “academic neutrality”—such as deconstructing the pluralistic unity of the Chinese nation—and discourse surrounding the “China threat,” undermines collective memory. This infiltration leverages the precise distribution capacity of digital ISAs, replacing the historical materialist perspective with algorithmic echo chambers.

The conspiracy of the three major ideological currents serves a unified goal—deconstructing the class and historical nature of buzzwords to reproduce capitalist social relations. Education gradually inculcates the concept of “rationalizing” peer influence through vocational ethics courses, transforming labor alienation into an inevitable stage of career progression, thereby diminishing youth sensitivity to exploitation mechanisms. The popularity of the term “emotional value” reflects quantification trends in emotional support, as platform algorithms commodify interpersonal interactions into tradable emotional products, masking authentic mutual aid needs within social relations. The essence of ideological dimensions is the implicit reproduction of social relations; postmodernism, consumerism, and historical nihilism each disguise exploitation as “free choice” through “depoliticization,” “subjective consumption,” and “historical rupture,” respectively, confirming Althusser’s statement that “ideology is reproduced through subjective submission.” The structural collusion between ideological state apparatuses and cultural hegemony makes “motte-and-bailey” tactics a covert

mechanism to dissolve class narratives. To dismantle this ideological fog, it is imperative to uphold the comprehensive stance of Marxism-penetrating symbol illusions with historical materialism, exposing capitalist logic through surplus value theory, reclaiming interpretive authority via discourse critique, and constructing firewalls through institutional innovation. Only by relying on the complete theoretical framework spanning philosophy, political economy, and scientific socialism can we regain cultural leadership in a protracted “positional struggle.”

4.3 Critical Analysis of Marxist Theory:

Based on Gramsci's cultural hegemony and Althusser's theory of ideological state apparatus, the fundamental operational mechanisms of the “motte-and-bailey” phenomenon are analyzed from aspects of textual manipulation and ideological infiltration. A deeper understanding of the political and economic logic and ideological construction behind it demonstrates that Marxist theory—especially the critique of political economy and ideology—provides a profound analytical framework to fundamentally unveil the alienation of labor relations and ideological disguises obscured by youth buzzwords under “digital capitalism.”

From a political economy perspective, the popularity of buzzwords like “gig worker” is not accidental; it reflects the deepening process of labor commodification in the digital age. Marx identified capitalism's essence as transforming labor power into commodities. Currently, the rise of platform economies and gig work models covertly catalyze the self-commodification of workers. The term “gig worker,” used with self-deprecating and generalized intent, obscures class distinctions by framing workers as interchangeable, undifferentiated “human resources,” thereby diminishing the recognition of capital's fundamental appropriation of surplus value. Behind this discursive strategy lies digital capitalism's attempt to reduce class issues to individual psychological or attitudinal problems, thus undermining the legitimacy of collective resistance. The proliferation of such buzzwords constitutes both a cultural phenomenon and an embodiment of ideology in material practice. As Marx argued, ideology functions to conceal true social relations and to construct “common sense” favorable to ruling classes. Terms like “gig worker” and “lying flat,” presented in a seemingly neutral or satirical manner, naturalize and individualize systemic oppression, leading workers to accept their exploitation as voluntary choices. This process diminishes class consciousness and hampers the imagination of alternative social arrangements. Only by returning to Marxist political economy and ideological critique can we truly expose the collusion between capital and ideology behind these rhetorical devices. This approach not only facilitates understanding of how such buzzwords are manufactured and disseminated but also reveals how these symbolic practices serve to reproduce capitalist production relations in the digital era. The critique should go beyond discursive deconstruction and aim at transforming unequal social relationships and reconstructing workers' agency.

5. Pathways of Marxist Theoretical Discourse Analysis

The phenomenon of “symbolic substitution”—the semantic restructuring that diminishes the narrative of class struggle—is rooted in a systemic disconnection from Marxist totality. This collusion is embedded in postmodern deconstruction of the materialist view of history, which obscures the analysis of production relations; consumerism's masking of the exploitation revealed by surplus value theory; and historical nihilism's undermining of the emancipatory path guided by scientific socialism. Addressing these challenges requires a return to the dialectical unity of Marxist philosophy, political economy, and scientific socialism: employing materialist historiography to penetrate symbolic illusions and unveil the institutional roots of labor alienation; using surplus value theory to expose the exploitative nature of individual competition narratives; and reconstructing collective liberation practices through scientific socialism. Leveraging the comprehensive analytical framework of Marxist theory, the following three avenues should be developed to counteract “symbolic substitution.”

The first step involves conceptual disenchantment, which requires deeply activating the critical momentum of Marxist labor theory of value, returning to the essence of labor and the dialectical thinking of historical materialism. The phenomenon of “lying flat” appears as a passive resistance by youth against the “involution” phenomenon but is, in fact, rooted in alienated labor under capitalist production relations—Marx's theory of labor alienation highlights how capitalist logic transforms laborers into commodities, with the labor process shifting from creative autonomy to mechanical repetition. Workers are unable to attain the dignity and meaning

they deserve from their labor, instead falling into self-exploitation. For instance, delivery couriers trapped in algorithm-optimized “shortest path” models experience their creative labor alienated into mechanical cycles within data streams, vividly exemplifying Marx’s concept of the triple alienation of labor from the product, the process, and its essential nature. This is evidenced by the expropriation of surplus value—such as platform commissions reaching 30%—and the reduction of labor itself to calculable “active labor time,” thereby losing the human essential nature. So, how should one undertake conceptual disenchantment? First, it involves revealing the exploitative essence of capital’s extraction of surplus value behind “lying flat,” implementing reforms toward public ownership, and encouraging workers’ participation in algorithmic and institutional design—strengthening the potential for labor liberation under socialist systems. Furthermore, capitalism often transforms the narrative of “striving effort” into individual competition, masking the antagonism between “capital” and “labor” with individualistic stories, transforming Marx’s exposition of the alienation of labor, products, and human essence into a competitive arena of self-optimization. From a Marxist perspective, “striving” should be understood as a collective effort to promote productive forces and realize social development. “Common prosperity” does not imply equal wealth distribution but entails sharing the fruits of social progress through multiple adjustments of production relations.

Second, the consolidation of ideological frontline positions must be articulated within the framework of Marxist interpretation, emphasizing the need to challenge the collusion between educational alienation and the reproduction of class. Recently, the term “Kong Yiji Literature” has sparked internet debates—contemporary youth sarcastically use the metaphor of “academic gown” to depict employment struggles, revealing the core issue of the disjunction between education industrialization and the labor market. Despite rising gross enrollment ratios in higher education, the average employment contract rate among humanities graduates remains low, reflecting a distortion in talent demand driven by capital-transforming education from a means of “holistic human development” into a labor commodity factory. While economic growth accrues, workers’ earnings fail to keep pace, exacerbating social inequality. Marxism criticizes capitalism for transforming education into a process of dehumanization and instrumentality; genuine education, aligned with socialist principles, should restore the focus on “holistic human development,” and the notions of “academic credentials” and “social stratification passes” should not be conflated. The Central Committee of the Communist Party and the State Council’s “Outline for Building a Strong Education Nation (2024–2035)” advocates “integration of five educations + industry-education cooperation,” revealing that embedding vocational education into the industrial upgrading process is essential to freeing individuals from the shackles of “academic gown.” Promoting educational equity and cultivating innovation capacity are particularly critical. Symbols associated with “Kong Yiji” should be transformed into powerful tools to critique resource monopolization in education markets, encouraging vocational training that aligns with industry needs. The reputation of “Township Exam Taker” underscores how underprivileged youth face immense barriers attempting upward mobility through exam-oriented education, with class stratification deepening due to capitalist resource monopolies. Marxism advocates for reforms such as equitable distribution of educational resources and compulsory education to break the entrenched stratification, promoting a new era talent concept rooted in national conditions—valuing innovative contributions over hereditary background—and gradually establishing a performance-based evaluation system.

The third aspect involves innovations in communication strategies, urgently requiring the implementation of conceptual countermeasures against mainstream discourse, fostering a revolutionary integration of systemic reform and symbolic production. The core lies in embedding Marxist standpoints, perspectives, and methodologies into new media practices to achieve an organic unity of theoretical logic and communicative effectiveness. This necessitates transcending mere content replication or superficial formatting, instead conducting a profound analysis of the communication laws within the new media environment and understanding youth psychology, employing systematic strategic designs to ensure socialist ideological discourse effectively reaches and resonates with young audiences, fostering internal comprehension and identification. Initially, in terms of communication philosophy, maintaining a balance of orthodox innovation involves steadfastly upholding Marxism’s guiding role in ideological work, ensuring the scientific accuracy and correct orientation of disseminated content. Concurrently, leveraging new media technologies and platforms to transform substantial theoretical discourses into narrative language and visual symbols aligned with youth cognitive habits is essential. In the communication process, establishing dynamic feedback and targeted adjustment mechanisms through big data and algorithmic analysis allows real-time monitoring and assessment of the efficacy of mainstream discourse transmission, audience concerns, and ideological trends.

Adjustments to strategies and content should be made promptly based on feedback data to enhance relevance and effectiveness, with a focus on foregrounding forward-looking and guiding topics to proactively steer public opinion rather than merely responding passively. Ultimately, the innovation in communication strategy aims to promote the transformation of theoretical cognition into practical recognition, integrating ideological education with societal praxis. This involves encouraging youth participation in social practice and experiencing national development achievements to deepen their understanding of Marxism's scientific and practical nature. The goal is to translate Marxist theoretical appeal and the vibrancy of contemporary socialism with Chinese characteristics into perceptible, relatable, and actionable values and conscious behaviors.

The ultimate pathway to resolving “superficial epistemic shifts” lies in returning to the triple unity of Marxist theoretical logic, historical logic, and practical logic: on the theoretical level, dialectical materialism reveals the essence of labor alienation in “lying flat,” surplus value theory exposes the exploitation narratives behind “blessings,” and scientific socialism guides collective practice towards shared prosperity; on the historical level, it is essential to recognize that “superficial epistemic shifts” are evolving forms of capitalist ideological transition from 20th-century consumer alienation to 21st-century algorithmic manipulation; on the practical level, constructing a nested framework of discourse contestation, institutional empowerment, and global dissemination is vital when workers participate in algorithm design to dismantle technological neutrality, when vocational education reforms shatter credentialal shackles, and when Chinese narratives gain recognition among Generation Z, only then can “people-centric” principles transcend political declarations to become lived experiences for youth. This process profoundly affirms General Secretary Xi Jinping’s assertion: “Marxism is not just academic study within a study,” but a transformative force capable of changing the world. Only by transforming integrated Marxism into perceptible institutional advantages and participatory discourse production can the proletariat’s cultural leadership be consolidated in ideological frontlines.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

In the current era characterized by the proliferation of internet slang, the phenomenon of “blame-shifting” has become widespread, infiltrating youth lexicon with implicit non-Marxist ideological risks. This includes the erosion of class consciousness, the weakening of labor valuation, and challenges to mainstream discourse authority. The spread of this phenomenon is essentially a product of the collusion between capitalist logic and digital technologies-algorithmic recommendation systems reinforce “echo chambers,” immersing youth in depoliticized discursive environments; the flow-driven economy fuels the rapid production of trending terms, reducing Marxist class analysis to an outdated label; consumerism reshapes youth value systems through terms like “disputatious consumption” and “moneymaking,” disguising alienation from labor as lifestyle choices. These harms are not limited to semantic distortions but extend to the systemic erosion of young people’s understanding of production relations: as the “996 work culture” mythologizes exploitation as individual effort, surplus value theory is extruded from the discourse; as “Kong Yiji literature” attributes educational inequity to personal inadequacy, mechanisms of social reproduction become invisibly mocked.

Utilizing sources such as the China Youth Daily, this study identifies trending terms with influential ideas and contentiousness, establishing a tripartite criteria for recognizing the “blame-shifting” phenomenon. Drawing on Gramsci’s cultural hegemony and Althusser’s “ideological state apparatuses,” the research conducts critical analyses of both textual and ideological dimensions, with a focus on Marxist ideological critique theories. It systematically dissects the three operational mechanisms-semantic substitution, value preconditioning, and dissemination fission-revealing how these processes deconstruct Marxist class narratives and conceal the essence of production relations, ultimately serving capital’s ideological infiltration. This analytical framework deepens understanding of the unique and complex nature of ideological struggles in the new era, highlighting the covert and symbolic features of ideological contestations in the digital age. Practically, the study proposes an integrated approach of “conceptual de-mystification, discourse power contestation, and innovative communication strategies,” providing actionable theoretical insights and methodologies to guide current youth ideological education, public opinion management, and cultural dissemination, thereby strengthening the ideological defense line. The core of this research is rooted in the urgent reality of “the complexity of ideological struggles in the new era and the need for effective youth ideological guidance.” It aims to respond to Xi Jinping’s directives on cultivating youth values and leading ideological work through critical analysis and constructive strategies, supporting the consolidation of Marxist guiding principles in the ideological domain, and enhancing socialist ideological cohesion and leadership. Methodologically, the study

emphasizes discourse analysis and theoretical critique, avoiding quantitative or case studies; future research could explore case studies-such as in vocational or factory settings-to uncover practical issues. Such mixed-methods research, including class consciousness surveys among young groups like “small-town exam takers,” could provide feedback on perceptions of blame-shifting phenomena, establishing a “theory-practice” feedback loop, and enriching empirical dimensions.

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Conflicts of Interest

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