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You Tube, We Comment: *I Am a Singer* and Geopolitical Encounters of Sinophone Communities

ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the reception of a top-rated reality show, *I Am a Singer*, among Sinophone communities on YouTube. Existing studies of YouTube focus on the burgeoning of participatory culture, the rise of microcelebrities, and fan labor. However, to date, little critical attention has been devoted to how YouTube constitutes a premium platform for the consumption of Chinese-language audiovisual content. Engaging in a close reading of user comments on YouTube, I analyze the ways in which Sinophone internet users of divergent political stances defend their respective positions. While the exchange of viewpoints rarely fosters a change in an individual's political views, this process has nevertheless catalyzed productive conversations pertaining to issues about historical legacies and their relevance to contemporary society. The comment space thus not only catalyzes public deliberation on a wide range of societal issues but also exemplifies the role that popular culture plays in inspiring geopolitical imaginations beyond geographical boundaries.

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INTRODUCTION

The launch of YouTube in 2005 has revolutionized the ways in which individuals and institutions create, share, and comment on visual content. Existing studies of YouTube focus on the burgeoning of participatory culture, the rise of microcelebrities known as YouTubers, fan labor, and YouTube's monetization strategies (Raun 2017). However, to date, little critical attention has been devoted to how YouTube constitutes an indispensable platform for the consumption of Chinese-language audiovisual content. Moreover, despite the flourishing of scholarly works on the politics of YouTube (Knudsen and Stage 2013), the ways in which Chinese-language users exchange viewpoints about their political stances and negotiate their linguistic and cultural backgrounds in YouTube's comment space remain unexplored.

In an effort to address this gap in scholarship, this essay examines the reception of *I Am a Singer* (*Wo shi geshou*), a top-rated reality show, among Sinophone communities on YouTube. Since the release of the first season in 2013, *I Am a Singer* has invoked much discussion on YouTube around such issues as gender politics, cross-Strait relations between mainland China and Taiwan, music production, and sensitive political events. Engaging in a close reading of user comments, I analyze the ways in which audiences of diverse backgrounds share thoughts about their sociopolitical stances. The comment space thereby not only functions as a cultural public sphere that catalyzes public deliberation on a wide range of societal issues but also exemplifies the role that popular culture, mediated by emergent technological platforms, plays in inspiring geopolitical imaginations beyond geographical boundaries.

In what follows, I first situate this study within the context of existing scholarly research on the comment culture of YouTube. Then, I offer an overview of *I Am a Singer* and discuss how the program exemplifies a significant shift in media production during the 2010s: namely, the move of media production from Hong Kong and Taiwan to mainland China. Ironically, the status of mainland China as an emerging center of cultural production goes hand in hand with an escalation in political tensions between mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Against this backdrop, YouTube constitutes a significant channel through which Chinese-language users of divergent political stances encounter one another and defend their respective positions. More importantly, while the exchange of viewpoints rarely fosters a change in an individual's political views, this process has nevertheless catalyzed productive conversations pertaining to issues about historical legacies and their relevance to contemporary society. Lastly, I address the implications this study has for understanding popular geopolitics mediated by digital platforms.

COMMENT SPACE ON YOUTUBE

Since its inception, YouTube has been controversial for eliciting a wide range of user responses to audiovisual content shared on the site. Inflammatory activities, ranging from trolling and flaming to the dissemination of racist remarks, have had a prominent presence since the site's beginning. The interaction among YouTube commenters catalyzes the emergence of networked antagonism regarding racial discourses (Murthy and Sharma 2019). Meanwhile, YouTube has also been shown to have positive implications for individuals of divergent perspectives for learning to accept differences, thereby fostering the forging of "cosmopolitan cultural citizenship" (Burgess and Green 2009). Moreover, although this diverse range of user-generated comments has varying connotations for YouTube communities, emotion has been proven to play a significant role in the formation of networked publics that engage in political deliberation (Lee 2019). For instance, Patricia Lange's (2014) study of user responses to rant videos, an "inappropriate" genre according to conventional standards, unveils the complexity of comments made by users, ranging from the expressing of compassion and extending of support to engaging in discussions about public affairs.

Insightful as these studies are, they nonetheless focus on analyzing user responses to audiovisual content on YouTube in a Western context. Thus, the ways in which users respond to such content in a non-Western context remain largely unexplored. Noticeably, the popularity of YouTube has boosted the visibility of Asian communities, who capitalize on the platform to produce and distribute user-generated content (Guo and Lee 2013). More importantly, YouTube challenges the imbalance in cultural flow from the United States to the rest of the world and offers a valuable opportunity for producers, distributors, and consumers in non-Western contexts to have a global reach (Jin 2017, 3883).

The rise of YouTube is also concomitant with the deepening of media commercialization in China. Provincial satellite television stations, as represented by Hunan Television (hereafter Hunan TV), Jiangsu Television, and Zhejiang Television, have taken the lead in successfully transitioning into commercial entities. YouTube offers a unique opportunity for these television stations to establish official channels overseas and to reach global audiences. The high quality of entertainment programs produced by these television stations attracts Sinophone internet users to consume these Chinese-language products and to probe into the identities of participants in the comment space of YouTube. Though these programs highlight the diverse backgrounds of their participants to increase entertainment value, and thereby attract a large number of subscribers, the responses these programs invoke in YouTube's comment space nonetheless mirror the historical geopolitical

issues that continue to haunt the present. In this respect, the comment space on YouTube exemplifies how the Sinophone internet constitutes "a dynamic set of encounters and narratives in the lived realities of 'Chineseness,' where 'being Chinese' is a fluid, sometimes imposed, and often challenged notion" (Sullivan and Chen 2015). By explicating the ways in which Sinophone internet users contest each other's ideological stances through the conduit of an entertainment program, this essay illustrates the inherently intertwined relationship between entertainment and micropolitics embedded in internet users' everyday lives.

GEOPOLITICAL SHIFT OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION

I Am a Singer is modeled after the Korean singing competition program of the same title, licensed from Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation in South Korea. In January 2013, Hunan TV began airing the first season of *I Am a Singer*, which ran for three months. Each week, well-known singers perform in front of a selected studio audience, and audience members vote for their favorite performers. Professionals working in the music industry are also invited to cast votes that carry greater weight than the votes of the studio audience. Eight seasons were released between 2013 and 2020. Although competition rules vary slightly from season to season, in general, singers who receive the fewest votes will be replaced by newcomers. Each season ends with the live broadcast of the Grand Final, in which finalists compete for the championship.

I Am a Singer departs from earlier music talent shows produced in China in several respects. This is one of the first music shows to gather together participants from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Southeast Asia, America, and Europe. The diverse backgrounds of participants are symptomatic of China's self-positioning as an emerging land of opportunities that attracts talent from all over the world. In particular, the participation of famous singers from Taiwan and Hong Kong who were enormously popular in mainland China in the 1990s, evokes a strong sense of nostalgia among audiences. Moreover, the fact that these Taiwan- and Hong Kong-based celebrities participate in mainland China's entertainment shows is representative of a significant shift in where cultural production happens in these three regions. This trend has been reinforced in the years since the series' debut: massive talents in Taiwan and Hong Kong, including producers, directors, cinematographers, and actors, continue to relocate to mainland China for better career opportunities (Tai 2013). In accordance with this trend, the distribution model of *I Am a Singer* represents the ambitions of Chinese television stations to make inroads into overseas markets: Hunan TV launched an official YouTube channel named "China HunanTV Official Channel"; as of April 24, 2021, it has 4.22 million subscribers. This channel broadcasts entertainment programs on YouTube immediately after they are aired in China. The sense of contemporaneity brought forth by the (almost) simultaneous global distribution of these programs stimulates the desire of Chinese-language users to post their responses to a show close to its initial release. Many of these users will also repeatedly return to comment on earlier episodes when new ones are uploaded to YouTube. My analysis of user responses on YouTube focuses on the first season of *I Am a Singer* because of its high ratings on TV as well as the heated debates it has provoked across the internet.

NETWORKED ENCOUNTERS

The competitive nature of *I Am a Singer* may be the reason it easily gives rise to animated discussions among audiences regarding the performances of the singers, the rankings they receive, the credibility of the voting system, and so on. The first season gathered thirteen popular singers from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, including Yu Quan, Shang Wenjie, Sha Baoliang, Chyi Chin, Paul Wong, and Terry Lin. These singers belong to different age groups and gained fame at different time periods. Singers from Taiwan and Hong Kong, such as Chyi Chin, Paul Wong, and Terry Lin, are iconic figures who exerted a tremendous influence on mainland audiences in the 1990s. By contrast, the 1998 rise of Yu Quan, China's first soft rock duet, marked the rapid takeoff of the popular music industry in China. Another example is Shang Wenjie, the 2006 champion of *Super Girl*, another singing competition television program. Also produced by Hunan TV, *Super Girl* signals the successful transition of television stations from propaganda organizations into commercial enterprises after decades of struggle with market reforms. Thus, *I Am a Singer*'s inclusion of well-established singers in Taiwan and Hong Kong and young talents cultivated in China makes the competition appealing to audiences who might root for different celebrities.

The first season of *I Am a Singer* consists of thirteen episodes. As of June 13, 2019, the season's episodes have generated a total of 4,251,674 views and 1,890 comments on YouTube. My analysis draws on the comment exchanges of users in response to the Grand Final, in which the duet Yu Quan won the competition. Given the stellar performance of Taiwanese singer Terry Lin, as well as several other singers such as Aska Yang, some viewers questioned the fairness of the results, while others defended Yu Quan.[1] Admittedly, any type of online discussion will often extend in multiple directions as commenters' discursive styles may vary widely. My

analysis focuses on two of the representative patterns of message exchange in YouTube's comment space: debate and deliberation. Both patterns illustrate the ways in which Sinophone users' comments on the show are intertwined with their reflections on political issues such as cross-Strait relations and identity politics.

DEBATE AND DELIBERATION

Online debates regarding the Grand Final center on the fairness of the competition's results as well as the extent to which geopolitical status affects a commenter's viewpoints. In the following quotes, viewers compared notes about the competition results:

> Post 1
> I am from mainland China. But each time I watch the show I feel pity for Terry Lin. He well deserves the appellation "king of singers." Although Yu Quan performed well, they tried too hard to impress the audience. It is not fair.

> Post 2
> It is inevitable that Yu Quan took first place. Domestic audiences [in China] might not appreciate the Taiwanese style of singing.

> Post 3
> My generation grew up while listening to their songs over the past fifteen years. Their songs have been with us through our transitions from students to employees and from children to parents. These two guys might appear to be ordinary, but they are highly motivated and represent the spirit of China.

> Post 4
> I prefer Terry Lin. Yu Quan is okay. But if you use headphones, Terry Lin's voice is definitely more appealing. I am not from Taiwan, mainland China, or Hong Kong.

In these posts, some commenters express their support for Terry Lin, while some try to make sense of the outcome. Post 2 attributes the results to differences in cultural tastes across the Taiwan Strait, while post 3 explains the significance of Yu Quan for the commenter's generation. Interestingly, although users may choose to remain anonymous online, most commenters seem to have felt compelled to volunteer information about their origins. Both post 1 and post 4 sever one's geopolitical background from one's viewpoint on the singers' performances. This act indicates the commenters' shared belief that clarifying their identities as outsiders may help enhance the credibility of their statements. Nevertheless, both posts' emphasizing of the origins of the commenters elicited backlash from fellow commenters, as shown in the following exchanges:

> Post 5
> I don't understand why as you are commenting on *I Am a Singer*, you highlight the fact that you do not belong to any of these regions [mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong]. Moreover, both Hong Kong and Taiwan are a part of China.

> Post 6
> It does not really matter whether or not you belong to any of these regions. You just do not have any common sense. How frightening! I am so glad that you are not Chinese!

> Post 7
> The previous commenter [post 4] merely meant to say that he or she liked a particular singer, instead of highlighting regional difference! Because previously, when audiences supported singers from the same region, they also created lots of controversies. These commenters were ruthlessly criticized for having brain damage [*naocan*]!

> Post 8
> In reality, only Yu Quan knows how to cater to the taste of mainland audiences. When it comes down to it, after all these years, the audience's capacity to appreciate music is analogous to those who only truly enjoy street food. [You] need to be relatable, approachable, and lively. Yu Quan's performances have achieved all of these goals. It takes time to develop different types of music and to broaden the horizons of audiences.

Posts 5 and 6 seem to offer a deliberate misreading of post 4 in order to assert the commenters' shared political view that Taiwan and Hong Kong are parts of China. Post 7, in response, defends post 4 and explains why it is important to clarify one's geopolitical background. Then, post 8 attributes Yu Quan's success to the domestic audience's lack of refined tastes and complements the point raised in post 3 regarding the cultural significance of Yu Quan. The implied message of post 8, though, is that Chinese audiences have not had much exposure to music that would appeal to those possessing more exquisite taste. Thus, they could not appreciate Terry Lin's performance. The sarcastic tone of this post elicited another round of comments, between users who self-identified as Chinese or Taiwanese in particular. These exchanges showcase the possibility for audiences to engage in rational discussions of political issues, despite the divergent political stances these audiences maintain.

> Post 9
> How come a music show never fails to stimulate debates about politics? Some Taiwanese viewers are overly political. How exactly are they different from the Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution? ...

In this season's finals, the only singer I don't like is Yu Quan. Then, so what? Some singers are better live while others are better in their recordings.... Singers like Terry Lin and Aska Yang do not benefit from voting systems with live audiences anyway. Why the hell are there so many political factors involved? Shouldn't Taiwanese audiences who cast such doubts reflect upon their own mentality?

Post 10
It's funny to see a few extreme comments. My friends, no matter where you are from, forget about the few bad apples in the group. We are here for the music, but there are always people who enjoy creating tension.

I rarely watch entertainment shows. I was originally uninterested, but this program is so good. This show introduces singers to us with whom we originally are not familiar....

So, I really think ranking is not that important. Instead, what matters more is preparing an excellent stage for singers to fully display their talents.

Post 11
Taiwanese seem to only favor Taiwanese singers. I hope we can overcome regional prejudice. Otherwise, we should not be inviting Taiwanese singers. Those from mainland China and Hong Kong would well suffice.

Post 12
Who said that Taiwanese only root for Taiwanese singers? Although Aska Yang is my favorite singer, I also like such mainland singers as Sha Baoliang and Li Jian.... Please do not treat us as if we are brainless. It is only those naive netizens and media that are brainless and full of biases.

Post 13
Indeed, I am Taiwanese, but I feel that if you want to win, you should be ambitious and choose the song that might best impress your audience. Yu Quan impresses me the most, and I also like the songs that Yu Quan sings.

Comments quoted here illustrate the process in which users engaged in rational deliberation. While post 9 reacts strongly against the sarcastic tone conveyed in post 8, post 10 extends support for post 9 and eases the tension by calling the commenter "my friend." Then, post 12 and post 13 respond to post 11 and clarify that not all Taiwanese are provincial. All commenters agree that the quality of the music matters more than the rank received by each singer and that neither Taiwanese nor Chinese should vote for a singer simply because of regional affiliations. Further, the point made by post 10, that "what matters more is preparing an excellent stage for singers to fully display their talents," touches upon a crucial factor that accounts for the success of *I Am a Singer*. Aside from inviting well-known singers, the program gathers together top-rated choreographers, performers, and sound specialists to work with singers to ensure spectacular performances. Consequently, while competition among contestants may function as a marketing strategy for this reality show, thereby creating tension, suspense, and excitement for viewers, the high quality of music production in *I Am a Singer* also reflects the rise in economic power among China's television stations.

Following these conversations, serious discussions around cross-Strait relations unfolded. An exchange of messages between a self-identified Chinese study-abroad student in the Netherlands and a self-proclaimed Taiwanese covers a wide variety of topics, ranging from cultural exchanges across the Strait to political systems to information control. The following quotes illustrate how these two users employ rhetorical strategies to strike a balance between emotionality and rationality. While emphasizing the importance of holding a "rational" stance when expressing opinions, these users also indicated their resistance to each other's political stance.

Post 14
I have been observing this online dynamic for quite some time. I do not think it is necessary to comment on who sings better, Terry Lin, Aska Yang, or Yu Quan. Everyone's assessment standards may vary.... But, my Taiwanese friends, you are really biased. You do not even know Yu Quan. Then how the hell does Yu Quan's winning of the competition relate to politics? I really admire what you call a "democratic country." In this land of democracy, how come you do not even know Yu Quan, who has been popular for 20 years? By contrast, most entertainment programs in mainland China welcome Taiwanese performers. Who on earth is more politicized? ... Wake up, those Chinese who live in Taiwan!

Post 15
I think you have lots of misunderstandings. We do not really understand each other. Let me tell you a bit more about this. Trolling is not representative of Taiwan's internet culture. The majority of rational Taiwanese do not post here, since they do not want to waste time on these meaningless debates.

Regarding the "bias" that you brought up, indeed, we do not know Yu Quan. But this show introduces them to us.

The question now boils down to, first of all, why do we not know Yu Quan, a group that has been popular in mainland China for so long?

This has nothing to do with democracy. Even if we are democratic and open-minded, if you are close-minded, then what can we do about it?

Cultural exchanges are relative, not to mention the economic interests that drive these exchanges. If you don't accept us, then we will not be able to be introduced to your cultural products. This has nothing to do with democracy.

Political issues have existed for quite some time. Just like how your central government always claims that Taiwan is a part of China, this is a relative concept. I am not saying that China is inferior. In Taiwan, there are lots of programs that introduce advanced technologies in China. We understand contemporary China, yet your perception of us is still stuck in a previous era....

I initially thought you were a rational Chinese. But your last line—"Wake up, those Chinese who live in Taiwan!"—makes me realize that you are just as biased as these people that you look down upon.

What is democracy?

In Taiwan, you can wave China's national flag.

In China, you can only wave China's national flag.

Post 16

I can only say that it is wise to propose "One China with respective interpretations" [*yi zhong ge biao*]. Our views differ a lot. Hopefully time may change us. If you get a chance, come visit the mainland.

Post 17

I think that "One China with respective interpretations" is meaningless. Since each party may offer their interpretations of what China means, there are no points of convergence. This is just a kind of self-deception....

The reason why we hold different opinions is because we do not know each other well. Of course, I consider myself someone who holds an objective position. After all, I might not know China as well as you do, but I do know more about Taiwan.

To be honest, for us Taiwanese, I think we are not in an advantageous position in terms of military power, economic power, or markets. In the long run, Taiwan independence is impossible. We do not stand a chance of receiving recognition from superpowers, so I would not be surprised if we came to the point of reunification, or one country, two systems. I am prepared for that. But if that does happen, it would definitely be a tragedy.

Post 18

I appreciate having the opportunity to exchange views with rational Taiwanese netizens like you....

As for Yu Quan, you probably do not know that entertainment celebrities in mainland China were not allowed to promote in Taiwan prior to 2012. By contrast, take a look at how many Taiwanese celebrities appear in China's shows....

I do not know if you are allowed to wave China's national flag in Taiwan. I only know that a friend of mine, an exchange student in Taiwan, was told by his Taiwanese professor that "You had better return to your China. Taiwan does not welcome you." ...

It is easy for mainland China to defeat Taiwan. But it is difficult to eliminate these populist thoughts. The younger generation in mainland China is ambitious, while riots and protests prevail in Taiwan. Students in Taiwan are talkative when it comes to national affairs, but they are not down-to-earth when they need to commit to something. If this situation continues, it won't take long for cross-Strait unification....

I really like to communicate with rational netizens like you. We can further discuss via WeChat if you would like to. I may not agree with you, but I will always support your rights to express your opinions.

In these posts, both commenters emphasize the importance of holding an objective viewpoint and express their appreciation of each other's willingness to share thoughts on a rational basis. Both commenters express a shared belief that the inadequacy of information has factored into misunderstandings among users. Thus, it seems each has urgently posted information he or she felt the other did not know in order to support his or her own position. For Taiwanese, Chinese do not understand the status quo of Taiwan, while for Chinese, Taiwanese do not know about the discrimination mainland students experience in Taiwan, nor are they aware of Taiwan's restrictions on mainland celebrities. Meanwhile, both users' emphasis on rational discussion is supplemented by their employment of rhetorical strategies to play up the emotional tenor. Post 18 sarcastically questions the significance of political activism in Taiwan by posing the rhetorical question "What's the point?" For the Taiwanese commenter, while acknowledging the disadvantaged international situation of the Taiwanese government, he or she uses the example of national flags to defend the core value of democracy. Notably, none of the discussions regarding sensitive political issues—such as reunification or Taiwan independence and democracy or lack of democracy—arrive at a consensus. Nonetheless, the juxtapositions of emotional appeal and rational deliberation in these posts not only demonstrate that entertainment shows bear great potential for eliciting political deliberation and fostering mutual understanding

beyond geographical borders but also shed new light on the nature of political debates online.

In the fields of political communication and media studies, scholars have studied the entangled relationship between entertainment programs and their political implications in Sinophone communities and beyond. Prominent genres such as standup comedy, online parody, and satirical television[2] have proven effective mediums for political communication and civic engagement. As most of the existing research focuses on discussion forums located in mainland China or Taiwan, my case analysis adds to this body of literature and highlights the particularity of YouTube, a transnational platform, for Sinophone users to discuss region-specific issues. Notably, unless equipped with the technological know-how required to use virtual private networks (VPNs) that circumvent regional restrictions, mainland users in China cannot access YouTube. These restrictions on access makes it safe to conjecture that the majority of YouTube users with mainland backgrounds reside outside of China. They access YouTube for the convenience of consuming Chinese-language cultural products. Consequently, YouTube constitutes a special channel for these users to encounter fellow Chinese-language speakers of drastically different backgrounds.

Moreover, YouTube commenters' employment of discursive strategies, a juxtaposition of emotional appeal and rational deliberation, enriches the existing understanding of political debates online. In his pioneering analysis of the cross-Strait tension between netizens in mainland China and Taiwan, Shih-Diing Liu reveals how internet chat rooms constitute an "'affective space' of a terrain of contestation," which is in many ways incompatible with the normative image of a consensual public sphere; the display of emotional intensity and the desire for other parties to feel one's sentiments are far more important than reaching a consensus (2008, 438). My analysis complements Liu's study and showcases how, despite their different political views, internet users have endeavored to enhance the persuasive style of their posts by striking a balance between emotionality and rationality. While the factors contributing to these discursive patterns have yet to be studied and require future research, this observation showcases the diversified styles of political deliberation on an anonymous basis.

CONCLUSION

Taking as a case study the reception of a top-rated talent show that enjoys trans-regional appeal, this essay addresses the role that digital platforms, exemplified by YouTube, play in remediating the geopolitical imaginations of Sinophone internet users. Not only has YouTube enhanced the visibility of Chinese-language cultural products in a global context but it has also offered a channel for Sinophone communities to encounter one another and contest the ideological stances of their communities. The productivity of online communities, ranging from their reflection upon voting systems to cross-Strait relations to contemporary societal problems, demonstrates these pluralized forms of political deliberation. Although this essay focuses on user responses to one reality show, the discursive patterns—debates and deliberation—that emerge from the audience's reflection upon geopolitical issues and identity politics exemplify Sinophone exchanges over a wide range of visual texts on YouTube, ranging from Chinese-language television dramas and movies to news programs and popular music. Read in this light, this study not only highlights the increasingly converged domains of entertainment and micropolitics embedded in internet users' everyday lives but also illustrates the significance of studying popular geopolitics in the digital age.

NOTES

1 All posts quoted and discussed in this article are retrieved from YouTube comment space for the thirteenth episode of the first season of *I Am a Singer* (Hunan Television 2013). All translations are mine.

2 For standup comedy, see Mintz (1985). For online parody, see Meng (2009), Wu (2011), and Zhang (2016). For satirical television, see Jones (2010) and Gray, Jones, and Thompson (2009).

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