

## Fandom of foreign reality TV shows in Chinese cyber sphere

Susan Boyle, the Scottish singer who claimed her fame in the reality show *Britain's Got Talent*, finally made her debut in China in 2011. Media coverage repeatedly cited multiple cancelations of her planned visits to China as a disappointment to Chinese audiences and the debut visit as a fulfillment of many longings. The previously failed attempts included inviting Boyle to sing three songs in the 2010 New Year's Eve Gala organized by a major TV network Jiangsu TV, which was said to cost the station USD 500,000. The visit that was finally successful was made to support the Chinese version of *Britain's Got Talent*, produced by another major TV network, Dragon TV from Shanghai. This case of Auntie Susan, a nickname used by Chinese media and audiences, is an illustration of the popularity of transcultural media products in contemporary China. However, the reality show, itself, has never been broadcast on any Chinese mainstream TV channels.

The majority of Chinese audiences access and consume foreign reality shows on the Internet due to the unavailability of such shows on TV. Audiences often put a considerable amount of effort into searching online sources for the shows and translating the episodes into Chinese subtitles. Their intense commitment has granted them the title of fans and their activities fandom. This recent wave of fandom of foreign reality shows is a continuation of the fandom of transcultural media products such as TV shows (e.g., *Friends*) and movies (e.g., Hollywood blockbusters). The fans, old and new, share similar motivation of taking the flow of entertainment content under their own control, against commercial control by the local TV networks and political control by the Chinese government. Whereas this rhetoric has been heard many times in fan communities, scholarly thinking regarding the globalization of cultural market points out that these fans serve as immaterial labor, or people who conduct activities that are not normally recognized as “work” yet produce the “cultural content” of the commodity, for transnational media corporations. The competing interpretation mirrors the theoretical debate in the research field of cultural industries: how much autonomy does the local have compared to the global?

This paper attempts to follow the recommendations made by prior studies (e.g., Wang, 2009) to

complicate the dichotomy between the local and the global by integrating the political economic, cross-cultural, and aesthetic analyses of the fandom over foreign reality TV shows in China. Drawing evidence from our months of participant observation and 23 in-depth interviews with active fans, we first describe in detail how the viewing experience is fully mediated by the Internet, a space in which various forces such as the state, global capital, and local capital mutually influence each other in interacting with users. A cross-cultural comparison between foreign and local shows elicited from the interviewees is presented with an emphasis on the fans' evaluation of aesthetic standards (i.e., their critique of local shows as being *Jia*) and their own perception regarding the impact of foreign shows. We conclude with a discussion on how the state must be included in analyses of transcultural media products, as well as a discussion considering how the views of immaterial labor vs. fan activists can be reconciled without denying each other.

### **Beyond the Dichotomy**

The globalization of the market economy, aided by the new wave of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) such as the Internet, has certainly changed the way of producing, circulating and consuming cultural products. Transnational flow of information and entertainment goods has proliferated greatly around the world, as seen in the popularity of Hollywood movies in the global market. As Wang (2009) argues, the globalization of cultural markets is often viewed through two contrasting perspectives, one of which is the critical tradition that prognosticates cultural imperialism rising. Since it is impossible that “today a country or region could isolate or de-link itself from the global networks of power” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p.284), cultural imperialism is argued to be inevitable when those with more power force their cultural products to those with less power, resulting in homogenization of various cultures, deprivation of audience choices, and denial of local autonomy.

The critical school points out that even local consumers who actively participate in the consumption process (e.g., fan fiction) are not able to break free from the logic of capitalist exploitation. Scholars such as Terranova (2000) and Cote and Pybus (2007) called the active

participation of engaged consumers “free labor” or “immaterial labor”. Both concepts frame the active reading and creative reconstruction of global cultural products as “value-enhancing labor” that helps cultural industries to “offload some market research labor onto viewers” (Andrejevic, 2008, p.24). ICTs such as the Internet are the basic infrastructure upon which such new forms of labor are built. Andrejevic (2008) argues that online spaces for active consumption are sites of production that blur the boundary between office and home, work and leisure, as well as paid and unpaid labor. Without dismissing the creativity and enjoyment embedded in active audience participation, the critical school disagrees that such activities necessarily destabilize the corporate control over popular culture.

On the other hand, a post-modern perspective (Wang, 2009) celebrates popular democratization that is enabled by the gradual “de-differentiation” between the economic and the cultural. At this stage of global capitalism, Jameson (1998) argues, cultural forces are no longer separable from economic forces, both of which are major productive forces. As such, local cultures strive to survive and flourish through market means, such as producing one culture’s own goods that are made by local teams and targeted at local audiences. Instead of being homogenized by the culture in power, this perspective suggests that a de-centered or de-Westernized cultural landscape is possible (Curran & Park, 2000). The emergence of cultural trading blocs and regional centers partially supports this perspective, showing that the complete dominance of Hollywood as predicted by cultural imperialism has not been the reality.

The collective efforts of local cultures to resist cultural imperialism are grounded in the dispersed consciousness of local communities and individuals. The active audience perspective (Fiske, 1989; Hall, 1980; Morley, 1993) suggests that audiences, as located in communities and histories, are actively negotiating, if not subverting, the meanings conveyed in cultural products. For instance, Radway (1984) finds that romance readers form “interpretative communities” to collectively make sense of texts. Ang (1985) observes the cultural differences in reading *Dallas* among audiences who come from different countries that vary in their histories, values, and traditions. The variance in cultural proximity

and cultural capital has been used to explain the emerging phenomenon of cultural trading blocs, which demonstrates that globalization is by no means a one-way process (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988; Straubhaar, 1991).

Fans are the most active component of audiences and display an intense engagement with cultural products. Jenkins (2006) uses the term “fan activism” to refer to the efforts fans make to bring the flow of media under their own control. Noting that fan activism has changed the relationship between consumers and corporate media, Jenkins proposes further that the “participatory culture” accumulated through fan activism could be transferred to the political domain, as well. An example of fan activism cited by Jenkins points out how fans on YouTube appropriate their video-editing skills to make viral videos that support their favored candidates in political elections. Van Zoonen (2004) explicitly argues that there are significant similarities between fan communities and political constituencies: both come into being as a result of performance; both are involved in activities such as discussion, participation, and imagination of alternatives; and both rest on emotional investments that lead to affective intelligence. Although online spaces are dispersed, networked fan communities allow their members to “move amongst a complex ecosystem of sites” (Baym, 2007) without losing the shared identification with the fan objects (Soukup, 2006). In addition, virtual fan communities allow fans to effectively organize themselves to influence the fan objects they are attracted to, enabling them to re-shape their relationship with artists or stars (Theberge, 2005), or re-write commercial television narratives (Costello & Moore, 2007).

The dichotomy between cultural imperialism and popular democratization (i.e., immaterial labor and fan activism) sets the limits of our theoretical framework regarding the implications of the active consumption of transcultural media products. Many scholars have made the call to go beyond this dualistic model of examining transcultural media consumption. Among various attempts to reconcile the opposition, Wang (2009) suggests that we should avoid seeing the global and the local as two poles with one always threatening to take over the other. Instead, “as no one force necessarily processes a

pre-determined advantage, the direction and nature of change is seldom totally dictated by a particular party” (Wang, 2009, p.136). We are in favor of this new development to complicate the dynamics among the multiple layers and dimensions that are associated with the global and the local. We agree with Miller (2008) that our examination must integrate political-economic, cross-cultural, and aesthetic analyses of transcultural media. In the following part, we provide a description of the political economy of transnational cultural industries in China.

### **Popular Culture and the State**

What is hidden in the global-local dualism is the intermediary role of the state. What makes the Chinese context especially interesting is also the dubious role of the state. Since its transformation into the post-socialist era, the Chinese state has relaxed its totalitarian reign over Chinese society (Yu, 2009). The most prominent new force is that of the market economy. However, the intertwining relationship between the state and market economy in China is exceptionally complicated: Within the country, the state purposefully and carefully plans and implements marketization, whereas local capitalists consciously and willingly conform to state orders. Global capitalist forces eyeing the Chinese market are often faced with two challenges simultaneously: political control from the state and commercial competition from local corporations. The state, building its legitimacy upon nationalist morals and economic performance (Zheng, 2007), is caught up between the need to integrate with globalization trends and the desire to protect local industry from global competition.

Transcultural media conglomerates have to operate in this type of political economy, and the products they sell evoke mixed reactions from the state. Popular culture in the Communist model was deemed to possess an ideological significance, and the Chinese state once had complete and intense control over the production of all kinds of cultural goods at various levels in the political hierarchy. Although commercialization of the mass media had been introduced a few decades ago (Zhao, 2008), the speed of opening up the cultural market is clearly slower than other kinds of markets. Policies and regulations are still very much effective in shaping the cultural market. A recent example of this sees

that the Broadcasting Bureau banned the use of all forms of audience voting in television programs, which basically terminated the *American Idol*-type of reality shows that had been extremely popular around 2005-2007 (Wang, 2009). The close control of the cultural market by the state has resulted in a flow of information far from being fully free and purely market-driven.

Fung (2008, p. 61) finds that the localization of transnational media corporations in China has gone “from an exploratory stage of testing the governmental allowance of ‘globalness,’ through taking refuge from seeking joint projects with the local corporations, to the formation of the joint state-global-capital corporation.” A mutually dependent relationship seems to take root when transcultural media conglomerates are co-opted to not challenge the state’s ideological status and the state collaborates with such conglomerates to produce cultural products that are politically correct and commercially attractive. This relationship helps to explain some of the self-contradictory state behaviors found in China. Transcultural media products that are considered to be inconsistent with the official ideology are made unavailable to the majority of Chinese by banning them from circulating through official channels (e.g., state-controlled theaters). Meanwhile, the state (intentionally or unintentionally) tolerates unofficial and illegal channels (e.g., pirated DVDs or free online downloads) to provide earnest and savvy consumers the access to such content. Commercial activities around the content (e.g., stars from popular American sit-coms featured in Chinese advertisements) are also allowed.

The influx of foreign information and entertainment via both official and illegal means, without doubt, has changed popular culture in China. From Hong Kongese/Taiwanese pop songs, to the Japanese and Korean waves, to British/American movies and TV shows, cultural products, produced outside mainland China, shown on official TV channels and sold by street vendors, have become an inherent part of the everyday lives of Chinese urbanites (Zhang, W., 2006). Tan (2011) observes that the cross-cultural consumption of *Friends*, an American sit-com that is mostly accessed through unauthorized ways in China, shows dissimilar readings that deploy both referential and critical frames. Although some local audiences yielded a dominant reading, cultural defense was also seen in their

interpretation of the sit-com. When interviewing producers from a provincial TV station, a researcher (Zhang, X., 2006) finds that “local” is understood as a multi-dimensional concept that entails more than just the local vs. the global divide (e.g., the local vs. the central refers to the political hierarchy that differentiates the state level from the province level). When terms such as global or international were used by these producers, the terms often signal quality and universality. Despite recognizing that young and enthusiastic fans of foreign content are immaterial labor for transcultural media conglomerates, Fung (2009) suggests that such collective consumptions have immense mobilizing potential that can act as conduits to challenging the state authority. Yang (2009) also sees such potential in the prosaic and playful style of online activism.

The Chinese context has rendered the scholarly inquiry of the implication of active consumption—or fandom—of transcultural media products more interesting by introducing the question of the omniscient presence of the state. How do we conduct our cross-cultural and aesthetic analyses when the political economy demonstrates the state as a powerful intermediary, which is by itself a complex actor (Zheng, 2007)? Our position is that we cannot bypass the state in our analyses but we need not prioritize the state (Zhang & Wang, 2010). Both commercial exploitation and political mobilization can co-exist in fans and their activities. With this balanced stance in mind, we ask the following questions: How do fans digitally access, consume, and reconstruct transcultural cultural products? What are the cultural and aesthetic values that have attracted these fans? How do fans perceive the impact of their active consumption of transcultural content on themselves?

### **Methods**

We employed virtual ethnography—a combination of participant observations and in-depth interviews—as the key method in this research in order to gain insights into the lives and practices of Chinese fans in online fan communities. Virtual ethnography is the process of conducting and constructing an ethnography using an online environment as the site of the research (Evans, 2010). It enables the researchers to make observations of and participate in online communities through a

number of computer-based methods. Described as an effective method to investigate the ways in which use of the Internet becomes socially meaningful, virtual ethnography can “be used to develop an enriched sense of the meanings of the technology and the cultures which enable it and are enabled by it” (Hine, 2000, p. 8).

The first step in conducting our virtual ethnography was to identify the most active online communities for Chinese fans of foreign reality TV shows, which serve as our observation sites to find relevant textual materials and a sampling framework to locate interviewees. We decided to focus on foreign reality TV shows because of the high popularity of reality TV shows now in China as well as the relatively scarce academic examination of the topic. After careful scrutiny of various online fan communities such as BBSs (Bulletin Board Systems), subtitle websites (i.e., yyets.com, 1000fr.net, ragbear.com, sfileydy.com, huahuakorean.Joinbbs.net, and hdbird.com), and Baidu post bars (i.e., forums), it is clear that post bars have become the main website for Chinese fans to share and express their enthusiasm for foreign reality TV shows.

The second step is to identify the most popular foreign reality TV shows among Chinese audiences. As previous research (Zhang & Mao, 2013) has shown, the majority of foreign entertainment content is not provided in official Chinese outlets and there are mainly two channels for Chinese audiences to access foreign reality TV shows: watching them on video streaming websites and downloading free copies online. Therefore, our estimation of popularity relied on an overall consideration of numbers of downloads and views that can be obtained from video streaming and downloading websites. An initial list was compiled to include fifteen popular foreign reality TV shows.

The third step is to identify particular Baidu post bars based on both the popularity of shows and the activeness of user participation, since some of the highly ranked shows did not trigger heated discussions online, such as *Project Runaway* and *The Voice UK*. We double-checked the initial list by examining the numbers of members, topics and posts of each corresponding post bar. Two of the shows from the initial list were thus excluded. Our final list included thirteen Baidu post bars of foreign reality



TV shows. Among them, eight come from the US (i.e., *American Idol*, *America's Next Top Model*, *The Amazing Race*, *The X-Factor US*, *Survivor*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, *America's Got Talent*, *The Voice US*), four are from South Korea (i.e., *Kpop Star*, *We Got Married*, *The Romantic & Idol*, *Running Man*), and one belongs to the UK (i.e., *Britain's Got Talent*).

After finalizing our target post bars, we conducted participant observation in these bars to discern how they operate in their day-to-day routines. One of the authors registered as a member of post bars in February 2013. The other author has been a passive observer since April 2012, and kept a close eye on the daily trends of these bars. The researchers took advantage of their experience to fully explore the activities provided by these post bars, such as checking-in, reading and writing posts and comments, watching videos, browsing through images, in-site messaging, searching archives, and many others.

In-depth interviews through instant messaging tools (e.g., QQ and Baidu Message) were conducted with 23 members of these post bars during April and May of 2013. The interviewees included bar managers (moderators) both sitting and retired, as well as active and influential members (judging from the popularity of the posts they authored and recommendations from the managers). We started by contacting sitting managers who could be identified from the home page of each post bar. After that, we utilized the snowball sampling technique to recruit more interviewees. We intentionally sought a diverse sample in terms of personal background, community affiliations and roles (see Table 1). Our interviewees are mostly young adults around their early 20s. Their geographic locations show that most of them are from economically affluent areas in China, with a few interviewees currently residing out of China. Their occupations ranged from college students to working professionals, coming from a variety of industries. Surprisingly, most of them (15 out of 23) are males. Considering that almost no refusals occurred when we invited interviewees, we tend to think that the male dominance is a reflection of the gender composition of active members and managers of these fan communities.

[Table 1 about here]

We obtained written consent from the interviewees through Baidu Message when we first contacted

them. Twenty-two of the interviews were conducted on QQ (a Chinese instant messaging tool) and one through Baidu Message, depending upon the interviewee's personal preference. Each interview took from 1-4 hours with an average of 2 hours. An interview guide with 50 questions divided into 4 sections was used as a rough guideline during the interviews. However, not all questions were asked of each of the interviewees, and new questions were added occasionally varying from interviewee to interviewee.

Textual materials were collected to serve as background information and examples. Throughout our observations of and participation in these post bars, we purposefully gathered heated discussion threads on a variety of topics, either recently posted or stored in historical archives. During the interviews, we also asked the interviewees to provide links of posts that they mentioned as examples. Finally, Baidu site documents (e.g., FAQs, announcement, help, and terms of use) and other relevant news reports were also studied.

### **Watching TV on the Internet**

Most existing literature about online fandom treats fan activities on the Internet a continuation or extension of their offline experience of watching TV on televisions. The active participation of fans is often aimed at influencing the fan objects they have enjoyed through media channels other than the Internet. The online fan activities include the interpretation of the content (e.g., Costello & Morre, 2007), the reconstruction of the content (e.g., Helleskon, & Busse, 2006), activism to re-shape the production process and mechanisms (e.g., Rowe, Ruddock, & Hutchins, 2010), as well as to influence the artists or celebrities involved (e.g., Theberge, 2005; Soukup, 2006). As such, online fandom cannot be completely cut off from the production line assembled by corporate media.

The case of watching foreign reality shows in China is to a large extent an experience independent of the medium of television. Among the 23 interviewees, only a few of them mentioned that they first encountered the reality shows on TV. One interviewee said that he saw the reality show *Amazing Race* on a channel of Shanghai TV Station in 2002 but immediately told us that he is no longer watching this

show on TV. The majority of our interviewees either serendipitously bumped into the reality shows when browsing the Web or were introduced to the shows by their friends and family members. Almost all of them watch the reality shows exclusively on the Internet now for the following reasons: First, some reality shows such as *American Idol* were banned in China due to its format being deemed inappropriate by the government; second, the import of foreign shows was often delayed for months or years due to the long process of getting official permissions; third, the import of foreign shows was also not continuous, with regular interruptions due to both economic and political reasons. In contrast, the Internet provides a free, real-time, and non-disrupted access to such foreign shows.

The online sources of these foreign reality shows contain official and unofficial, legal and illegal Internet services. Official sources include the websites of foreign TV networks that provide free live-podcasting. Many Korean TV networks are pioneers in running this model. Other official sources are Chinese video websites such as Youku (similar to YouTube), which have agreements with foreign producers and streamline the official sources on their own web pages. Some smaller video streaming sites also do the same without having any agreements with the original producers. The last and most important source often falls into the grey area of being semi-legal or illegal. Zhang and Mao (2013) describe in details how subtitle groups record, digitalize, translate, and disseminate foreign cultural products and provide them to Chinese audiences for free. Our interviewees indicated that they are used to consuming content from both sources because the official live-podcasting is in its original language and the versions from the subtitles groups are in Chinese.

A typical online viewing process starts by searching for sources and schedules, which are important information found in fan communities such as Baidu post bars. After figuring out when and where they can watch the shows online, many fans watch the shows together with other fans. The way in which they watch together is through the so-called live-broadcasting posts. Since the live versions are still in their original language, most Chinese audiences who watch the shows in real-time are not able to fully understand the content. Fans who have better language proficiency translate important

content (e.g., rankings or elimination of contestants) in real-time in the posts so that fans can discuss the content in real-time. Watching the video streams online makes it easy to shift between discussion windows and video windows constantly. After the first round of viewing live-broadcasts, almost all of the fans told us that they watch the video a second time using the subtitled version. An interviewee said that the discussions she had with fellow fans on the Internet sometimes re-shaped her perceptions of contestants and she watched the show in a different light the second time. The translated version is not entirely the same as the original version because the subtitle groups often creatively insert local jargon to make the foreign content more comprehensible and enjoyable to Chinese audiences. One interviewee who is located in the UK right now told us that although he is fully capable of watching the shows in their original form, he finds some of the localized translation amusing.

The remaining process of watching TV on the Internet is similar to previously documented fan activities. Fans cut the original episode into shorter sections in order to highlight the contestants or parts they enjoy the most. These so-called “cuts” are especially popular in post bars that are dedicated to particular stars or contestants. Fans express their fondness and loyalty to specific shows or their contestants by writing posts mixed with texts, images, and videos that attract fellow fans to reply. These support posts are called *Gailou* in Chinese, which literally means *building high-rises*, because the more replies, the longer the post, and the “higher” the “building”. Fans of different shows and contestants often engage in highly emotional debates, as well. These posts are called *Qiajia* in Chinese, which literally means *fighting*. Although bar managers are concerned about the disturbing effect of debate posts, they admitted that these posts are regularly seen and they themselves also engage in such fights under other user IDs.

Online fandom does not just stay online. Fans who met in the fan communities go offline and meet each other face-to-face. One interesting case is that of fans of *Amazing Race* and *Running Man* who organized their own online or offline competitions, borrowing the show structure. Fans also organize themselves to support their stars in real life by sending gifts to the stars, making trips to commercial

events that feature their stars, and so on. One extreme case was mentioned by an interviewee who is a fan of Korean popular culture. She mentioned that her friend, also a passionate fan of the Korean wave, went to Korea to study for her college degree in order to be closer to her stars.

It is now evident that the process of watching TV on the Internet is distinct from watching TV on television sets. One interviewee felt that he has more power over his viewing experience when watching the shows online. He can fast forward the parts he does not like or go to post bars for discussions when commercial breaks appear in the live-podcasting. The viewing experience, as pointed out by several interviewees, is also communal rather than individual. The discussions during and after the live-podcasting not only bring pleasure to the viewers, but also have significant influence on their interpretations of the content, especially when the foreign producers are not able to directly influence the fan communities yet.

### **Reading Reality out of Reality Shows**

This section provides cross-cultural and aesthetic analyses of the perceptions of Chinese audiences regarding the content of foreign reality TV shows and the impact of such content. Two questions are key to understanding fans' perceptions: First, how do foreign reality shows attract Chinese fans and why do fans fail to find such attractions in local reality shows? Second, how do fans perceive the impact of such content on their understanding of both foreign and local cultures, their criteria for evaluating reality shows and cultural products in general, and their broader skills, knowledge, and values?

Many interviewees were attracted to the shows by either the format of the shows or the stars featured in the shows. A relatively clear difference was observed between British/American and Korean shows. Most Korean reality show fans were already fans of particular stars before they started watching the shows. Almost all of the Korean reality show fans were first drawn to the shows because they knew that their favorite stars would be featured in the shows. These Korean show fans kept watching the shows because they were able to see "the other sides" of their favorite stars. Watching

such shows acts as an extension of their existing fandom of particular stars or Korean popular culture. A few Korean show fans mentioned that although some shows did not feature stars already known to them, they were still attracted because the unknown stars were “pretty”, “entertaining”, or “well-trained” by the Korean system. One interviewee referenced “the Big Three”, or the three biggest entertainment companies in South Korea, as guarantees of producing stars that cater to her taste.

In contrast, most of the British/American reality shows do not focus on celebrities but on ordinary contestants. Several interviewees answered that they particularly liked the component of featuring ordinary people who have talent. They also mentioned that they liked the component of competition, which is generally fair. When being probed why they do not find such components in local reality shows, many of the answers included a key word, *Jia*. The Chinese word *Jia* is polysemic and can be used to refer to the opposite of being truthful, or sincere, or authentic, or original. The fans we interviewed have used the word in all four senses. They were often fast to point out that many local reality shows copied the format of successful foreign shows and therefore, were rarely original. With regard to those local shows that had purchased franchise right from the foreign shows, the fans also found that the local versions were not consistent with the original versions. For instance, one of the managers of the post bar on *Amazing Race* gave us a detailed summary on the differences between the original and local versions in choices of contestants, sites of shows, rules, cutting and editing, as well as values conveyed. His conclusion was that the original version beat the local version hands down.

Fans generally thought that local reality shows tend to sell melodrama more than other components. They admitted that foreign reality shows also contain drama because the dramatic effect is one of the attractions that hooks-in audiences. However, they found the drama in foreign reality shows to be more authentic than those in local shows. To them, drama should not be scripted, rehearsed and staged, but should naturally emerge during the process of competition. An active member of the post bar on *America's Next Top Model* raised the example of one judge in the local version telling a contestant that if she could not lower her weight to a certain point within a few weeks, she would be

eliminated immediately. The contestant turned out to pass the weight test with a marginal difference. This interviewee interpreted this drama as pre-planned and over-cooked. Even more intolerable for the fans, some drama in local shows is completely untruthful. They mentioned that some leaked-news about contestants—such as their sexual orientation—is simply fake information released by the local producers in order to attract attention to the show. They also questioned the sincerity of both the producers and the contestants in playing out the drama. They interpreted that some contestants over-emphasize their pitiful life in order to gain sympathy from audiences and linked that behavior to the producers' encouragement in promoting melodrama.

The critique of local reality shows based on the concept *Jia* is further deepened when a minority of our interviewees reflects on the reasons of such lack of originality, authenticity, and sincerity. One of the reasons is the close control over the content from the government, which has put many constraints on local producers to work creatively. Another often-cited reason is the over-commercialization of local shows. Although foreign reality shows are also commercial, our interviewees argued that the foreign shows were not as “bloody” as the local shows. Quite a number of interviewees described how much the “in-your-face” kind of advertisements (e.g., TV hosts recite the advertisements verbally in the shows) disgusted them and thought that commercials in foreign shows were more “subtle” (e.g., commercial breaks can be skipped) and thus “appropriate”. The fans blamed local producers' motivation to “make fast money” that has killed creativity, originality, and authenticity. Only a few interviewees addressed the level of cultural differences. One interviewee explained that Chinese culture stresses harmony, and the local shows tend to emphasize the image of one big family, which makes the show look pretentious. In contrast, foreign shows like to focus on the personality of individual contestants, and the individuals are encouraged to present their true selves, which makes the show look sincere. Another interviewee said that Chinese culture puts work in front of leisure, and entertainment is considered a meaningless activity. The foreign reality shows demonstrate that leisure activities have their purposes and should not be despised in a culture.

When asking about the perceived impact of these foreign shows, many interviewees mentioned that they became more knowledgeable about the subject, be it popular music or different varieties of dances. Some of them also became more knowledgeable about the culture/country of origin than before and believed that the reality shows were portraying the reality of the foreign culture. Most of our interviewees denied that the foreign reality shows have changed their world views and core values. However, they mostly agreed that their ability to judge the quality of reality shows was enhanced by being exposed to foreign shows. Believing that they have better taste than others, several interviewees referred to fans of local shows as “too young”, “irrational”, or “brain-dead”. They occasionally got into fights with fans of local shows on the Internet, in which they accuse local fans of being ignorant and are, themselves, accused by local fans as being capitulated by foreign cultures. Interestingly, almost no one recognized that they were influenced by the global capital behind the transcultural media products. Even when we explicitly asked about their free labor invested in promoting the foreign content, they often responded with a simple answer such as “I don’t care”, or “I like the show so I want more people to like it”.

### **Discussions and Conclusions**

Our research found that Baidu post bars are currently the most prominent online community in which Chinese fans of foreign reality TV shows get together and share their fandom. Supported by other online tools such as Weibo and QQ, the post bar-based fan communities provide resources to access the content and facilitate a communal experience of watching TV on the Internet. The fans had to actively participate in production and circulation in order to locate the sources of content, translate the content into Chinese, and disseminate the subtitled versions to fellow fans. Their consumption, however, does not show a critical stance that resists the dominant reading of the global cultural products, partially due to the fans’ perception that their consumption hardly makes any profits for the original producers. However, cultural defense (Tan, 2011) has been utilized to interpret foreign content and their compatibility with local values. Whereas the fans refused to admit that their world views and



core values had been greatly changed by the shows, their evaluation of the quality of foreign vs. local reality shows signals the aesthetic transformation (i.e., changes in cultural and artistic standards) happening among these audiences.

We argue that this fandom of transcultural media products found in the Chinese cybersphere indicates the need to take a complex view on the process of globalization and its implications for the local. The nation-state plays an intermediary role that connects both global capital and local audiences. Proponents of cultural imperialism think that the only super power now, the United States, reinforces its status by selling its cultural products to other parts of the world. Other nation-states are seen as either incapable of or unwilling to challenge the dominant status of the US. Oftentimes, these less powerful states have to cooperate with global capital, through actions such as making policies that take away market barriers. We argue that the role of the state in globalization cannot simply be considered to be an agent of global capitalist forces because the state has its own need to survive as an entity. Our research shows that the Chinese state closely controls the official flow of information and entertainment in fear of losing ideological hegemony. Meanwhile, the state tolerates local capital (e.g., Baidu and various video websites) taking advantage of this shortage of foreign content by allowing a niche market to fulfill its needs. The local, in this case, is therefore comprised of multiple forces, including the nation-state, the local capitals, and the local audiences, with tensions existing among each pair of forces.

If we understand globalization from the perspectives of the state, the market, and the society simultaneously, it becomes less confusing why active consumers of transcultural media products in China can be seen as both immaterial labor and fan activists. The fans' activism in obtaining foreign content and sharing their fandom can be viewed as a resistance to state control over the flow of information. New media such as the Internet provide users with an alternative channel to get access to such content. Meanwhile, their activism contains the value-adding potential to help multinational corporations to nurture the market, cultivate audience taste, and promote products, which enables

profit-making via other means (e.g., sales of franchise right) and prepares the readiness of consumers should the state decide to deregulate the cultural market. Due to the fact that the multinational corporations have yet to find ways to directly make profits from the fans, we argue that the immaterial labor is more exploited by local websites such as Baidu than by foreign cultural corporations. This exploitation is in line with the state's attempt to strengthen local capital, which can later export their products to other national markets. This complicated relationship between the state and capital helps us to understand why the state tolerates such fandom although it contains the possibility to mobilize ideological challenges.

Given the double potential of fandom regarding transcultural media products, we are not going to make a holistic conclusion on the implications of such fandom. Instead, we propose that whether or not such fandom is able to lead to the building of a large active citizenry depends on how online activities influence fans to behave in offline spheres. For example, how would the communal experience of watching TV on the Internet reshape the ways in which citizens organize themselves for offline collective action? Or, how do the changes in aesthetic standards (e.g., the emphasis on originality, authenticity, sincerity, and truthfulness) affect their responses and reactions to all kinds of local cultural products, including the ones meant for promoting the official ideology? In addition to the nation-state, our analyses imply that both global and local economic capitals need to be examined carefully when we try to interpret the implications of online fandom of transcultural media products. We thus invite further research on the conditions which trigger the imbalance between the various forces that might lead to significant transformations in China.

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**Table 1.** Demographic information of interviewees

Username	Name of Post Bar	Role in Post Bar	Age	Gender	Location	Occupation
Satan Ujfalusi	American Idol, America's Got Talent	Active member	30	Male	Britain	Banking
Wow	American Idol, The Voice US	Active member	24	Male	Sichuan	Tourism
Sea-tangle of Caribbean	American Idol, So You Think You Can Dance	Active member	25	Male	Henan	Civil servant
Joemd	America's Next Top Model	Bar manager	23	Male	Macau	Student
Ginger Sauce Milk	America's Next Top Model	Active member	23	Female	Guangdong	Student
Cauchy	The Amazing Race	Bar manager	18	Male	Zhejiang	Student
Teddy KK	The Amazing Race	Bar manager	19	Male	Beijing	Student
Star Era	The Amazing Race	Bar manager	19	Male	Shanghai	Student
Fzkhello	The X-Factor US	Bar manager	20	Male	Guangdong	Student
Everyday Sunny	Survivor So You Think You Can Dance	Active member	31	Female	America	Student
Windy	So You Think You Can Dance	Bar manager	24	Female	Shanxi	Unemployed
Shi	So You Think You Can Dance	Ex-manager	25	Female	Singapore	IT product manager
1985tx4	America's Got Talent	Bar manager	27	Male	Beijing	Art designer
BiscuitHead	The Voice US	Active member	20	Male	America	Student
Marshburn	The Voice US	Active member	19	Male	Tianjin	Student
Angela_gao	Kpop Star	Bar manager	26	Female	Jiangsu	Finance
Jiexiao	We Got Married	Bar manager	21	Male	Jiangsu	Student
Jinshe	The Romantic & idol	Active member	23	Female	Shandong	Student
Han Zaixi	Running Man	Bar manager	20	Male	Unknown	Unknown
Spirit_han	Running Man	Bar manager	20	Female	Jilin	Student
A667809	Running Man	Active member	23	Male	Fujian	Management
Zhang Niannian	Britain's Got Talent	Bar manager	23	Male	Shandong	Student
Kikyo Kitty	Britain's Got Talent	Active member	24	Female	Beijing	Media