Sino-Cal realism: TikTok as a medium between new market dynamics

"In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes".

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Introduction

The title of this comment piece, pronounced “cynical” realism, is a portmanteau which makes reference to the vying utopian ideologies which emerge out of Beijing, the location of TikTok developer Bytedance, and California; home of Silicon Valley and TikTok’s US headquarters. The cultural subtext of the clash between China and the US has apt resonances with visual culture, with the title also gesturing at the work of American Pop artist Andy Warhol, whose works are touted as a form of “cynical realism” (Luethy 1995) for their post-ironic take on pop culture and hyper-industrialisation, similar to the 1990s mainland Chinese art movement of the same name (Kharchenkova and Velthuis 2015).

Visual culture is an apt container for exploring the underlying geopolitical tensions between these two global giants, particularly given that China and the US’ increasingly openly hostile relationship has been seen to shape quotidian digital practices (Liu 2020). And TikTok, as an increasingly ubiquitous informant of contemporary visual culture is particularly worthy of examination. The platform is one which facilitates social practices which sit explicitly at the nexus of geopolitics and visual culture.

This commentary highlights how TikTok’s political content, though rarely novel in itself, is shaped by the collision of vying utopian ideologies out of Beijing and California—a distinct cultural factor which lends a sense of ambivalence to the political content created on the platform. As such, this piece is less about TikTok as a radical new site for political protest or activism, but rather, a piece which suggests that we should adopt a position of scrutiny of the platform’s underlying cultural conditions ahead of making claims for its use as a tool for political engagement. As such, this commentary looks to discuss TikTok as part of a larger tradition of cultural artefacts at the crossroads of participation, activism, marketing and economic gain. It does so by unpacking this view by first outlining some of the reasons to be cynical about the economic and the geopolitical facets of TikTok’s usership.

TikTok’s political dialectics

TikTok hit one billion monthly active users (MAU) in 2020, just four years after its global launch. In the same year, the platform gained widespread attention for a series of viral user-generated videos relating to major global events; from
protest scenes shot during the COVID-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter marches and the US presidential election (Hayes et al. 2020; Basch et al. 2020). There is hardly a shortage of content to fuel TikTok’s ambivalent positioning as a tool of political expression, if not market disruption. The social network itself features short-form video content no longer than sixty seconds per clip, borrowing from the fast-paced ephemera which defines similarly growth-focussed social media start-ups such as Snapchat, Vine and Twitch. Pithy, user-generated video content for these platforms has been anointed a form of politics “rooted in everyday participatory practice” (Moreno-Almeida 2020: 3) and afforded the label of protest reportage (Pearce and Rodgers 2020). The tendency to frame forms of digital protest based on precedents set in recent years has seen TikTok, despite its relative infancy, inheriting a set of expectations from other social media platforms which have likewise been bestowed with a legacy of digital participation (Miao et al. 2021).

Further reasons for scrutiny become clear when we earmark other avenues of utopian thinking which exist in the reputation gained by social networks in the previous decade. The utopian reputation of social networks as spaces for facilitating protest and mobilising political action have been established by landmark acts of civil unrest over the last decade, spanning the Arab Spring (Wolfsfeld et al. 2013) to Occupy Wall Street (Milner 2013), through to Russia’s Snow Revolution (Shomova 2019). These dialectics of digitally led protest have been earmarked as “revolutionary” (Clarke and Kocak 2020; Wolfsfeld et al. 2013) by the wider public, in the case of the Arab Spring for instance; a hype which was dispelled as fast as it emerged (Gerbaudo 2012; Joffé 2011). And similarly, there are plenty of reasons to be cynical about TikTok’s political potency and its significance as a tool of political expression, not least of all owing to its nascent rise. In some senses, greater cynicism is a necessary precursor to more closely understand how the relationship between China and the US affects meaningful emancipatory action on the platform, with particular attention paid to how marketing dynamics and TikTok’s business bottom line play into its geopolitical force.

Reasons for cynicism are also mirrored by how quickly the emancipatory moment touted by the early years of digital civic engagement dissipated as hastily as it arrived. Recent revelations about the harms of social networking platforms, such as the likes of Twitter and Facebook, to incite polarisation of public debate sits uneasily alongside the possibilities for civil engagement that they foster, but this is indicative of an ambivalence which pervades Big Tech at large. This emerging ambivalence similarly tempers TikTok’s use and political content, as a platform divided between serving a business bottom line and ambivalent geopolitical intent. The economic pursuits of stakeholders and their market-driven ambitions complicate TikTok’s critical value as a protest tool and consequently, the status of the platform arrives at a more fractious framing than in previous years, without the neutrality of being viewed as either harmless recreation or self-expression (Hautea et al. 2021). TikTok’s geopolitical entanglements are equally tempestuous as its economic counterparts, especially when we consider the wariness surrounding TikTok’s parent organisation, the Beijing-based company, ByteDance. ByteDance’s ownership of TikTok has been malign for its possible state-affiliation—a threat which looms large in the US as a national security risk to surveillance, data theft and exploitation of users (Ehlrich 2018). In addition to this, TikTok’s Chinese-language equivalent, Douyin, also owned by ByteDance, shares some of the same strict content moderation rules with TikTok (Biddle et al. 2020); an association which borders on censorship of free speech, if only surreptitiously.

So, ahead of hasty assessments of TikTok’s political potency, there is evidence to suggest that greater scrutiny of the forces behind the platform ought to preclude such discussions, primarily in assessing the platform’s various entanglements. The perception of TikTok is somewhat polarised at present, veering wildly between speculations of being a tool for Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda or being merely an entertainment app (Schuman 2020). Despite the assessment of TikTok as a security threat to the US (Sevastopulo 2020), the view from China sees TikTok’s unprecedented expansion as a “mutually beneficial alliance” between the CCP and Internet companies at a domestic level and moreover, a key part of the discourse surrounding the internationalisation of the Chinese Internet (Miao et al. 2021). As such, it is worth reflecting on whether the Sino-Cal relationship is driven by a Chinese drive for soft power via a viral cultural export or by US ambition to exercise greater regulatory control over an ever-evolving cultural sphere.

**Silicon valley and its market logic**

As noted, TikTok is not dissimilar to other social media giants in adhering to a strict logic of marketisation, supporting a business bottom line with an obsessive drive towards growth (Donovan 2021). This bottom line stipulates monetisation at all costs and sees TikTok thrive through borrowing from the shared language of meme culture in terms of its formats and content—a lexicon which broadly pervades other Silicon Valley start-ups. This view of digital growth is born out of a Californian idealism which hails “content as king” (Graham 2015). And though its logic penetrates beyond the culture of US-based start-ups, its sprawling, memetic reach can be aptly examined using Limor Shifman’s (2012) ideas on the economic dimensions of political participation.
This “economy-driven logic” (Shifman 2012: 199) holds attention as a pinnacle of value in a new social contract of labour and participation rather than objects, which conform to an older economic model. This hints at the earliest iterations of the attention economy, even prior to the formal monetisation of social networking platforms. Shifman’s observations on the usership and content generated by video hosting platform YouTube anticipate TikTok’s own politico-ambivalence with its many “contradictory souls” (2012: 189). Shifman’s work posits that video memes can be broken down into two different categories: viral and memetic. The former is connected with marketing dynamics and the latter through their “structure of participation” (2012: 190) with users remixing and sharing existing videos. Shifman cites the “Downfall” meme as an early example of this, in which footage from a dubbed film clip featuring an actor playing an apoplectic Hitler has been repeatedly redubbed with new, often humorous subtitles, often about inane but topical subjects. However, it is strongly argued here that these distinctions between viral and memetic have converged under TikTok’s logic of marketisation; its platform and content have collapsed the boundary between viral and memetic into the singular monolith of “glossy corporate content” which Shifman reserves for describing viral forms of video (2012: 198). TikTok joins a tradition in the making, which sees these distinctions collide within an economy-driven logic, with the platform’s political content being fundamentally problematised partly by its status as an advertising platform.

Growth, and its more aggressive iterations in “growth hacking”, play a key role in this economy-driven logic of marketisation to which the convergence of memetic and viral video forms attests. The marketing ecosystem behind TikTok makes this dynamic possible and gives way to interference from other actors within a marketing sphere, such as stakeholders and advertisers—usually for the sake of growth in direct profit or its alternative in users’ personal data. Advertisers take advantage of TikTok’s mobile-first platform, with its format serving as a direct conversion point to drive business leads from a captive and impressionable audience (Murphy 2019). This business model conforms to the same logic of advertising but is packaged as a form of recreation and personal expression for users (Mhalla et al. 2020); a familiar model, not unlike the implicit social contract offered by other digital networking platforms.

A more granular look at the extrinsic dynamics sees that the logic of marketisation is fundamental to driving the virality of TikTok’s political content. As such, market forces and political action are symbiotically aligned in TikTok, with Tim Hwang commenting that social media has created a “liquid market of human attention” (2020). This symbiotic alignment of market forces and political action creates an even more ambivalent framing of TikTok’s political content and usership within the attention economy. This illustrates the issue at the crux of this comment piece, which asks whether protest can still be politically potent even when conforming to market forces. But of course, the convergence between software applications and market dynamics goes beyond the scope of TikTok as a platform, and owes a significant amount to a brand of social engineering distinct to Silicon Valley.

Beijing’s grand designs on soft power

TikTok’s adherence to the market logic of growth is indivisible from an ethos of Silicon Valley utopianism as a structural factor which problematises the platform’s stakes as a meaningful site for protest. However, Californian social engineering contributes only half of this dialogue, with the stakes leveraged by software engineering, namely the innovative recommendation algorithms shared by Beijing’s Bytedance and TikTok, being equally important here. These algorithms also supplement a viral mode of content creation in terms of the platform’s usership patterns and are likewise based on a similarly utopian set of narratives about economic growth (Ma and Hu 2021). This drive to grow marks out a clear nexus between Beijing and California, whose shared cultural characteristics are complemented by very different paths towards social control and the various hypocrisies these paths expose. The establishment of TikTok in a largely English-speaking market has seen its software develop parallel to its Chinese counterparts, albeit in line with a Californian set of governance ideals in line with Silicon Valley’s policy frameworks, described by Kaye et al. (2020) as a form of “parallel platformization”. It can be argued that the internal struggle to reconcile the ideologies of these two competing forces manifests most evidently in TikTok’s design as a platform, in its software engineering. As such, this section examines how the software behind TikTok’s platform fuels the content production processes which create some of these wider conflicts of interest (Ma and Hu 2021).

TikTok’s densely curated, continuous feed of information is particularly powerful for directing performative user behaviours (Guinaudeau et al. 2020: 2–10), favouring a recommendation algorithm which pushes viral content ahead of connections on the platform. Dissimilar to the friend-based network systems seen on other platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, TikTok and its analogue in China, Douyin, encourages random, compulsive encounters with content on the platform. Jia Tolentino (2019) describes TikTok’s barrage of content as “an enormous meme factory” whilst Katie Elson Anderson alludes to the network’s “creative chaos” and “uncertainty” as a critical feature of its design (2020: 8). TikTok and its Chinese counterparts’ engineered virality corresponds to Shifman’s claims for the wider economy-driven logic at play. These
algorithms have a clear lineage stemming from a Californian market logic in broadly provoking the creation of viral content at scale, but a key differentiator is that TikTok’s highly engineered back-end functions as a highly selective screener which prizes high engagement and otherwise censors content which is “culturally problematic” (Leskin 2019). This ranges from violent and pornographic content to that which is broadly anti-Chinese in sentiment, with recent controversy surrounding the alleged censorship of livestreams in Uighur dialects (Hamilton 2019).

The processes behind TikTok’s back-end development are a key influence on the political behaviours of its users, with recent scholarship examining how forms of social control on the platform have evolved to take on nuances of CCP messaging and disseminate it in a more surreptitious and palatable way. And so, despite the links between TikTok and the CCP being highly contested, Chinese users of Douyin nonetheless demonstrate extensive pro-China sentiment on the platform, with the latest video meme to emerge being transformational makeovers and street-style videos featuring idealised individuals immaculately dressed in Hanfu style attire. The revival of ancient Chinese Hanfu styles and their viral dissemination in the form of soft political content is a subtle nod at nationalist messaging, acting as an unassuming form of propaganda. They form an effective riposte to street-style videos found in the US, and a complement to the broader strategic ambitions of the CCP with its core tenet of “harmony” as it is derived from ancient tradition (Zhang 2016). This soft propaganda sees Douyin’s content actively supporting a status quo, with this vaunting of Chinese culture as “superior” sees the CCP go to great lengths not to export its culture but rather, wait on users to flock to it (Xuetong 2019).¹

Though TikTok has attempted to ward off greater scrutiny in its pledge “to be the most transparent and accountable company in the industry” (Byrne 2022), the spread of Chinese soft power is an undeniable aspect of TikTok’s geopolitical backdrop. TikTok’s algorithms, being engineered for virality, create a type of usership which complement some of the dynamics seen in the broader logic of marketisation (Omar and Dequan 2021). This process sees users demonstrating several overlapping behaviours with public self-expression entertainment and exhibitionism as key motivations (Omar and Dequan 2020: 124–134). TikTok provides an “intensive audiovisual universe” to its young userbase (Medina Serrano et al. 2020: 258) in the form of audiovisual content to add to their own videos, which facilitates the creation of content at scale and the formation of compulsive behaviours (Bruns 2012). Another element which adds to the platform’s ambivalent status arises from the lack of explicit political content which surfaces in TikTok’s Chinese counterpart; the content which does pass censors is merely viewed as a form of entertainment (Medina Serrano et al. 2020: 258).

An interrogation of TikTok’s software design proves valuable for understanding how the political content on the platform is produced and transmitted, but these are often not reconciled with the geopolitical tensions which provide an additional layer of understanding to the subject. But some of the key contentions at TikTok’s core are tightly bound up with an increasingly protectionist stance in the US against a rising China and its burgeoning soft power push, with the call to ban TikTok pushing some of these protectionist attitudes to the limits, having been dubbed the “crucible” (Long 2020) of Sino-US tensions. In many ways, TikTok has become a new point of discontent amidst Sino-Cal relations, with TikTok as the latest to be targeted in a series of Chinese-owned businesses, the US’ longest-held suspicions towards Chinese technology exports have arguably been directed towards the cultural component of these technologies and the ideologies that accompany them (Jeong 2020). But this cultural negotiation is fraught with more complications than the discrete containers of culture and policy might suggest, with both the platform and its geopolitical agendas being muddied by a multitude of stakeholders. In many ways this is no different to the ambivalent status afforded to other domestic platforms, even those native to the US in this current climate of distrust around Big Tech and social media. And recent evidence reveals that the struggle for sovereignty between China and the US has not been based on pure conjecture; TikTok’s censorship, leaching of user data and shadowbanning practices across the platform emerge in light of its growing volumes of political content (Biddle et al. 2020; Ehrlich 2018). Scrutiny of the tech industry at large rarely allows new technology to enter the market unchecked, but TikTok is not merely an issue for security but a competitive advantage economically. As such, the respective ideologies of its major stakeholders in China and the US reveal themselves along the lines of TikTok’s intrinsic software engineering and extrinsic social engineering dynamics.

Conclusion

Though it is difficult to designate TikTok as a meaningful site for political participation at this stage, the contentious precedence of social media as a tool for digital protest is only partially to blame. The platform, and the resulting content hosted by it, retains its distinct ambivalence thanks to being the latest bartering stick in a larger geopolitical struggle between China and the US. And so, to return to this notion of cynicism, the claim that, “in the future, everyone will be world-famous for fifteen minutes”,² being commonly attributed to Warhol, also feels apt to close this commentary. Fifteen minutes of fame becomes an apt container for TikTok and its usership; pointing

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to its fickle hype as the desire for growth at all costs; something which resonates well in an accelerated media age.

Though the case of TikTok opens up a wealth of possibilities for broadening what participation could be in some senses, its business bottom line increasingly encroaches upon its operational side. And the social platform is not alone in this as moderation veers into questions of censorship, and algorithms are seen to bear the hallmarks of explicit politicisation elsewhere. The argument made here seeks to nuance the debate around TikTok as a site of political action, looking at its entanglements in an economic and geopolitical realm ahead of such assessments. As such, this examination of TikTok’s value for political expression accounts for the market forces behind the platform as well as its stakeholders at a business level and a diplomatic level to prime future discussions about the platform and its potential for political expression.

The platform as a tool of protest is subject to the same cycles of prosperity and failure that have been witnessed in examples of other similar social media. So rather than staking out political ambitions for the platform and its utopian possibilities at this stage, we should be envisaging a way to reconcile political action with less asymmetrical logics of profit over people, as the current modus operandi of Big Tech. TikTok’s practices of protest are governed by forces which begin much closer to geopolitical and business agendas than is immediately evident, which in turn requires us to question the structural conditions which provide a precursor to certain political behaviours.

Notes

1 In this case, the party line on Chinese superiority is: “来而不拒, 不往教之”. Loosely translated here as “come to me and learn for I will not reject you, but I will never pursue you in order to teach you”. The CCP’s ideological position accords to a Confucian system which in turn shapes the platform governance of both TikTok and Douyin’s platforms and consequently, the converged viral-memetic forms of political content seen there.

2 For more on this, see Mattick, P. 1998, “The Andy Warhol of Philosophy and the Philosophy of Andy Warhol”, Critical inquiry, vol. 24, no. 4, pp. 965–987 and “Fifteen seconds of fame; India’s obsession with TikTok”, 2020, The Economist (London), pp. 31.

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