

Trans-border televisual musicscape: Regionalizing reality TV *I am a Singer* in China and Hong Kong

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Abstract

This article focuses on the regionalization of reality TV *I am a Singer* from China to Hong Kong. It explores the features of a successful flow of a reality singing contest with the concepts of mediascape, televisuality and cultural memory of pop music. The three research questions: what format structures of televisuality are being integrated in *I am a Singer*; how locals in China and Hong Kong interpret and appropriate *I am a Singer* to their experience of cultural identities and how trans-border televisual musicscape facilitates regionalization of television programme, are answered by textual analysis and in-depth interviews with 12 informants from China and Hong Kong. It is found that the focal programme is implemented with excessive performative style that holds audience's attention, authentic music performance that resonates with post-1980s identity in China and Hong Kong, and dramatic reality contest that links to nationalism and Hong Kong people's victimized identity. Identity politics is consumed by audience in China and Hong Kong as the dramatized excitement of the focal programme, which nurtures a group of loyal audience across China and Hong Kong.

Keywords

China, Hong Kong, identity, mediascape, reality TV, regionalization, televisuality

I am a Singer (Wo shi geshou) is a reality singing contest produced by Hunan Satellite TV since 2013. It is a licenced programme from Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation in South Korea. The singing contest invites pop stars mostly from China and Hong Kong, with a few contestants from Taiwan,

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South Korea and Southeast Asia. The contestants are filmed throughout their stay in Hunan, including their preparation, rehearsal and the actual contest. In each episode, the audiences in TV studio vote for their favourite contestants, and the one who gets the least votes will be ruled out. It is broadcasted through Hunan Satellite TV channel. In Hong Kong, the programme is received through satellite services and official online live streaming portals, such as Mangguo TV (MGTV) and iQiyi. Unofficial and grey channels such as video forums also provide recorded episodes for download. This reality singing contest received strong attention in China, with an average TV rating of 1.89%, and ranked among the top 10 variety shows in 2016 in terms of TV rating (CSM, 2016, as cited in iHeima, 2017). In Hong Kong, this programme triggered attention with continuous discussion in Internet forums throughout the broadcasting season. A re-run of each season of *I am a Singer* was shown by Television Broadcasting, the terrestrial free TV broadcaster in Hong Kong. This article tries to explicate the regionalization of *I am a Singer* from China to Hong Kong. It explores the synergy of reality TV and the identity politics in popular music performance in facilitating the flow of China-produced TV content to both domestic and regional market across the border. Specifically, there are three questions in this study: first, in what way televisuality is integrated and implemented in the format structure of singing contest; second, how local audiences in China and Hong Kong interpret and appropriate *I am a Singer* to their experience of cultural identities; and third, how trans-border televisual musicscape facilitates the regionalization of television programme.

Conceptualizing mediascapes and audience's reception

Appadurai (1990) conceptualizes the flow of mediated narratives carried by the electronic and digital platforms as 'mediascapes' (p. 299), in which the narratives are 'disaggregated into complex sets of metaphors by which people live' (p. 299). Thus, the notion of mediascapes shows that audiences are confronted by a complex flow of mediated narratives and from which they resemble their understanding of the world. This imagination is not a uniform one, and Alvares (2009) points out that the mediated narratives in mediascapes are rich resources for audiences to reinterpret the cultural others with their contextualized perception. In a study of modernity and capitalist imagination in South China, E.K.W. Ma (2011) introduces that the trans-border mediascape between Hong Kong and China facilitates identity imagination for the audience in the mainland.

Instead of a complete adoption of the modernity discourse, the contents are appropriated by audiences' reflexivity, which is a 'creative hybridization and contextualization of the mediascape and socioscope by an active audience' (p. 36). In light of this, Hall's (1973/2001) theory of 'encoding/decoding' ties into the understanding of trans-border TV programmes' reception. The highlight of studying the decoding realm of messages focuses on how audience generate meaning from the mediated text that fits into their own subject positions (Procter, 2004). Hall (1973/2001) provides a theoretical perspective for studying active audience with three possible ways of decoding a text, namely the hegemonic reading, oppositional reading and the negotiated reading. They demonstrate audiences' reflexivity in aligning, rejecting or questioning the dominant cultural order by creating meaning from the mediated text. The perspective of trans-border mediascape and active reception provides the analytical tool for understanding the regionalization of reality TV shows from China to Hong Kong.

Cross-border cultural exchange, polysemy and imagination

Hong Kong is a unique gateway for mainland Chinese to get a taste of modernity. E.K.W. Ma (2011) finds that television dramas from Hong Kong fuel the factory workers in South China to

connect with the imagined Western modernity. As a postcolonial satellite site, the media product in Hong Kong provides a shortcut for Chinese audience in the South China region to taste Western modernity and globalization (Fung, 2008). Television dramas and films produced in Hong Kong essentialize the imagination of urbanity, bringing the sense of satellite modernity (E.K.W. Ma, 2001) to Southern China and constituting an incomplete perception of globalization (Fung, 2008). Nonetheless, through media consumption, Chinese audience closely connect with Hong Kong in the cultural aspect, treating Hong Kong as a role model and the guide in the modernization pathway in the past three decades.

As the postcolonial Hong Kong is increasingly connected to China, Hong Kong people meet the Chinese interpersonally, thus making sense of Chinese and China through media. In everyday experience, the frequent border-crossers from Hong Kong to Southern China build up a fragmented but concrete and pluralistic interpretation of China, not only one China as stated in the state's discourse but also China of the South versus the North, China of the developed cities versus the underdeveloped rural, all of these articulate economic and cultural imagination (Mathews, Ma, & Lui, 2008). In the course of identifying with China and the sense of Chineseness, the demolition of sociocultural and economic boundary of postcolonial Hong Kong and China has been associated with the tension and cultural conflict or, in general, an 'Anti-China' sentiment that has been aggregating for a decade (N. Ma, 2015).

The flow and reverse flow of pop culture content between Hong Kong and China

The early 1990s mark the beginning of semi-marketization of China's TV industry, with the loosened control of satellite TV services and content import (Chan, 1993). The regional circulation of made-in-China historical dramas has been increasing since the 1980s alongside with the growth of China's TV market (Keane, 2008). Dramas and variety shows are flowing in between China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Regionalization of TV market in China and Hong Kong has been developing for two decades. Chan (2009) finds that regional televisions in China not only provide resources for audiences in the greater China region to enjoy a shared popular culture but also demonstrate local cultural elements from the mainland that attracts audience in the adjacent region. Previous studies in transregional television mainly focus on the ideological implication of co-production or cooperation between regional broadcasters. C. Chow and Ma (2008) find that trans-border TV drama production has reterritorialized the imagined boundary by situating the filming process in China and at the same time articulate national cultural stories. A form of structural hybridization is moulding Hong Kong television throughout co-production initiatives with counterparts in China since early 1990s (Chan & Fung, 2012). After a decade of development, China has been strengthened in television content creativity and production quality to the point that local broadcasters are able to produce innovative variety shows on their own (Keane, 2006). Artists from Hong Kong frequently engage in the China productions, and the programmes are relayed back to Hong Kong audience.

The growing cultural flow from the mainland to Hong Kong begins since late 1990s, when TV broadcasters in Hong Kong put China-produced TV dramas at prime time occasionally, as supplementary to the domestic productions (Li, 2003). The reverse flow of China-produced programmes, such as the TV drama *Princess Huanzhu* (Huanzhu Gege), had generated wide attention across Taiwan and Hong Kong (Keane, 2010). The drama reterritorialized the imagination of nostalgic China and the collective interpretation of Chineseness in the greater China region with reference to

the folklore of Qing dynasty (Lu, 2005). In 2015, there were 16 China-produced TV dramas imported to Hong Kong by Television Broadcasts Limited, the largest terrestrial broadcaster in Hong Kong, with 5 of them being shown in the free channel and 11 in the paid channels. One of the imported TV dramas from China, *The Empress of China*, achieved a rating of 27.2% or 1.76 million viewers, and was ranked the second of the top five dramas shown by the channel (Television Broadcasts Limited, 2015).

During the same period, there is an intensive flow of pop music between Hong Kong and China. It begins from the south and develops into a bilateral exchange. The border-crossing of Cantopop blurs the cultural boundary, where Cantopop symbolizes the hybridization of colloquial Cantonese and Chinese which resemble a postcolonial cultural identity (Chu & Leung, 2013), as well as the identity of the Hong Kong Chinese (McIntyre, Sum, & Weiyu, 2002). At the same time, the growing popularity of Mandapop in Hong Kong after 2000 articulates a sense of Chineseness in some local audience (Y. F. Chow & De Kloet, 2013; McIntyre et al., 2002). Across the border, Cantopop has landed in China for three decades (Fung, 2007). Until the 1990s, Cantopop in China represents modernity, and the singers are 'chic, modish, and modern' (Fung, 2007, p. 431), which swept the Mandapop out of market. Revitalization of Mandapop came in the early 2000s, when pop music and reality TV were mixed to be the *Supergirl* competition. The pairing of pop music and trans-border television marks the big hit of show in the Greater China region, a new wave of Chinese pop music began (Fung, 2013). In short, Cantopop connotes capitalist modernity in the late 20th century, while contemporary Mandapop leads the regional music trend (Chu & Leung, 2013).

Reality TV and the trans-border televisual musicscape

Reality TV format itself is found to have strong linkage with the audience's perception of social reality. One of the propositions is based on Foucault, Burchell, Gordon, and Miller's (1991) concept of governmentality, suggesting that audiences actively learn from reality shows the way of living, which is actually overshadowed by a broader direction of government policy (Ferguson, 2010; Ouellette & Hay, 2008). Second, reality TV is found to generate affect among audiences. Individuals match their lived experience and emotion with the programme content and develop affective tie (Skeggs & Wood, 2012). Previous studies of *Supergirl* have identified a form of 'democratic entertainment' (Jian & Liu, 2009, p. 528), which caters Chinese youngsters' desire of democracy. Although the show provides a media spectacle on democracy (Meng, 2009), it still addresses gender equality, individuality, and with a popular and glamorous form of music contest that allows participants to express their talent in music performance (Fung, 2013).

In light of the hybridization of eye-catching reality talent show and mediated flow of popular music, I draw upon the concept of televisual experience (Nelson, 1989) and televisuality (Caldwell, 1993) to coin the term 'televisual musicscape'. It specifies a particular mode of regional flow of television show that relies on excessive style, unique cultural memory of local pop music and the dramatic feature of reality TV. Televisuality suggests the self-consciousness of television in visualizing the immediacy and authenticity of the broadcasting content (Caldwell, 1995). Friedman (2002) demonstrates reality TV is a sophisticated format of televisuality, for it blurs the boundary of the actual and the dramatic, which convinces audience to believe what they see on the screen is lived reality. The perceived realness of reality facilitates its format-specific selling points, to turn laymen to celebrity, as well as downplaying celebrity to everyday laymen (Andrejevic, 2004). Specifically, televisuality is demarcated by two textual features, first, it shows a heavily stylized performance that caters spectacles to the extreme of exhibitionism, and second it inverses and

reworks existing television formats, presentational conventions, and play with narrative styles (Caldwell, 1995). Thus, televisual musicscape is conceptualized to depict the regional flow of televised pop music, Mandapop and Cantopop, that embedded into a creative form of unconventional singing contest broadcasted by trans-border television.

This article argues that the regionalization of reality singing contests resembles a trans-border televisual musicscape, which provides a multitude of shared cultural resources for audiences to actively reconstruct their subject positions among cultural-linguistically proximate regions. Furthermore, it adds to the present reception studies of reverse cultural flow from China to Hong Kong by contrasting viewers' identity politics against the same content on the two sides of the border.

Method

The presentation of televisuality is interpreted by a textual analysis of *I am a Singer* season four. There are 14 episodes in total, which was broadcasted from January to April 2016. In order to analyse local audiences' of the televisual musicscape, in-depth interviews are conducted, especially for understanding audiences' identity politics. Informants are invited in Hong Kong and Shenzhen. The choice of Shenzhen has taken into consideration that it has a complex population consisting of citizens from different provinces of China, which maximizes the variety of views to be collected. There are six informants invited from each region, and a total of 12 interviews are conducted. From China, informants are 23–30 years old, while for Hong Kong, they are 24–31 years old. All of them are working in Hong Kong and Shenzhen at the time of interviewing. Previous studies of pop and rock music focus at inviting teenagers and young adults as the informants, and they are the substantial audience. Larkey's (1992) study of Austropop and national identity covers high school and university students in Salzburg. De Kloet (2010) invites a similar group of informants in Beijing to study Chinese's self-identity construal in pop-rock music consumption. One way of engaging with potential informants for interview is to befriend with them in functional locales, such as city clubs for dance–music research (Bennett, 1999) and concert halls (Larkey, 1992). Alternatively, interpersonal relation and referrals are important in identifying informants for studying pop music and fandom (Fung, 2009). In light of theoretical and practical considerations, in this study the young adult informants are invited by referrals. Informants' names are shown in pseudonym created by themselves. Initial rapport with the potential interviewees helped us to identify whether they have watched *I am a Singer* before arranging meetings. Along with the textual analysis and in-depth interview, the contents of the regional flow and its reception are explicated for a comprehensive exploration of the televisual musicscape shared by audiences in Hong Kong and China.

I am a Singer: A hybridized format of televisuality

The reality singing contest utilizes televisuality to present a regional music competition in South East Asia. In episode 1, it starts by filming singers from the mainland China, Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan who start their travel to the TV studio in Chang Sha, Hunan. It demonstrates contestants' nervousness during the travel. This set of travel sequence represents a performance of unity, in which China upholds the core position in hosting a regional competition for the best singer. The opening sequence of every episode is energetic and impactful which indicates a big show is going to start. An intense and fast-paced violin orchestration plays as the background music. The computer graphic animation shows a dark universe with meteors shining at the

background. At the lower section of the screen, an earth-like planet explodes and a golden trophy shoots out from the ground, accompanied by a loud explosion boom sound effect. The title of show is crafted on the trophy, 'Wo shi ge sou', and the Chinese characters of *I am a Singer* appear on the first line, below to it is the English title 'I am a Singer'. The aesthetic style is borrowed from the 3D graphics of computer games, all of the objects are in solid colour with sharp and shiny tonal rendering. The message here expresses *I am a Singer* is an astonishing show that shakes the universe and it is a game-like television show. The opening sequence emphasizes liveness, with the caption 'count down' being shown at the lower part of the screen in sharp white.

The feature of liveness overwhelms the whole format design. Following the opening sequence, there is no voice over or background music, instead it cuts to some backstage preparation scene with ambient sound. For example, in the fourth episode, there is a rehearsal sequence right after the opening scene. It shows a group of musicians and the singer are trying out their song in a band room, with everyone dressed in casual wear, and a caption says 'final rehearsal'. This arrangement sets the space and time of the televised show in a linear form that begins with preparation, rehearsal, the grand opening and the performance. The television show is treated as a documentation of a real-life music performance from the beginning to the end.

To add a nuanced taste of realness and liveness, *I am a Singer* demonstrates a strong preference to handheld cinematography in the scenes that in between the actual stage performance. In the opening sequence, whenever it shows singers walking through a corridor to the studio, there is a handheld tracking shot. Instead of watching the pop stars walking closer towards the screen, the handheld shooting composition follows the singer simultaneously. This camera angle resembles the third person point of view, together with the ambient sound recording that depicts all background noise; the unstable and versatile filming style tells the liveness and nervousness from the producer's perspective. It suggests everyone in the television station is working hard to put up the live music performance.

Entering the music performance, the camera angle returns to audience's perspective and showcasing the extraordinary stage setup. The circle-shaped stage is mildly raised from the ground. While the singer and a band locate at the centre of the stage, a group of supporting musicians and backup singers are on the side. The establishing shots clearly demonstrate the strong manpower involved in the performance. Low-key lightings light up the singer only, and keep other musicians and the ambient dimmed. Instead of using floodlights as the main source, the screen shows tens of pin lights and spot lights shine over the stage. The dynamic, crisscrossed and colourful light rays flash alongside with rhythm producing a dance club feeling. This form of chiaroscuro lighting (Zettl, 2013) is a typical composition style for creating dramatic, intense and restlessness visual, with high contrast images.

The narrative and format of *I am a Singer* is shown as a mixture of reality competition and singing performance. This programme formula is characterized by three parts that intertwine with each other in every episode, which include the documentary narrative, the music performance and the dramatized competition. For example, in episode 8, it begins with the documentary of singers' everyday life a few days before the studio recording of *I am a Singer*. It shows the Hong Kong singers Hacken Lee and Joey Yung are rushing for a live performance in the United States, Coco Li is feeling sick on a bed, and the Taiwanese singer Jiaying Xu and South Korean singer Chi Yeul Hwang are attending another TV show. Then a final rehearsal sequence tells the studio recording is about to begin. After this transition, the music performance follows linearly. It is then juxtaposed with dramatized competition in between each singer's performance. They talk about their expectation towards themselves and the others. Commentators who bear the title of professor, composer

and veteran DJ criticize the contestants one by one. The dramatic climax arrives when the live audience vote for their favourite contestants and the producer of *I am a Singer* steps in to announce the ranking and the one to be kicked out. It emphasizes an emotional touch with the loser being asked to give a failure speech.

With the increasingly competitive television market, broadcasters try hard to differentiate their programme style in order to fight for their share of audience. It is under this consideration that producers begin to exploit all of the possibilities of existing television formats to reconstruct 'a visually based mythology, framework, and aesthetic based on an extreme self-consciousness of style' (Caldwell, 1995, p. 4). Taking into account the notion of active audience, producers redefine television viewers as highly reflexive individuals whose attention can only be retained by ever changing distinctive appeals and exhibitionism (Jones, 2005). This is mainly achieved by creating a televisual spectacle with cinematic appeal (Jaramillo, 2013). The format styling of reality TV amplifies the notion of televisuality by manipulating audience's perception of realism with 'forms that are adopted from apparently different genres and forms, thus creating connection and distinction simultaneously' (Bignell, 2005, p. 60). In *I am a Singer*, both style excess and blending of television formats are integrated to fully exploit the advantage of televisuality. It is the specialty of reality show or docusoap to engage with the audience through fictional realism that blends authenticity with drama (Bondebjerg, 2002). It is authentic that singers from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and Malaysia conduct live performance on the stage of Hunan Satellite TV. The authenticity of a live music contest is highlighted by the camera angles that capture the live music performers at the background and the highly involved live audience cheering for their idols from the back, which juxtaposed with backstage sequences showing the preparation of the next contestant. It is dramatic that all of the characters who take the role of singers, live audience and professional commentators interact together to put up an exciting drama of diva tournament. With this presentation style, *I am a Singer* localized the Korean format to a contextualized version of reality singing contest. In other words, *I am a Singer* is a singing contest created within a reality TV. It demonstrates the process that a singing contest is conducted from preparation to the show time in a documentary style, and seamlessly presents the live performance, which is an art of televisuality. Thus, this programme provides comprehensive resources for the audiences in China and Hong Kong to interpret and create their own meaning and cultural imagination. Trans-border reception of the show is unfolded in the following sections.

Tune in HSTV to be spectators of *I am a Singer*

Both China and Hong Kong audience are fascinated by the performative qualities in *I am a Singer* and appreciate Hunan Satellite TV's professional production. China informants tune in HSTV at 10:00 pm Beijing time on Friday, same for the Hong Kong audience with satellite service (Mok, Ng, Wong and Lam) and others (Ho and Fu) strike for a streaming connection through the relaying servers of Internet TV to watch the first-run broadcasting. Informants who love band shows, such as Zhou and Fu, are especially interested in the quality of music performance of *I am a Singer*:

If you have watched the typical television music shows in the mainland, you would feel, ugh, so static, boring, and not engaging. But this one is different, my experience is to listen with a pair of nice earphones and tune it louder, and you can feel it. They are really playing with the music. (B. Zhou, from Zhejiang province, personal interview, 3 April 2016)

With a strong preference for band sound, Zhou finds the music performance in *I am a Singer* suits her taste. She deliberately changes her behaviour of consuming TV shows by appreciating the performance with nice earphones, which suggests her satisfaction with the TV programme and willing to devote more to the televised music experience. For Fu, who plays band in leisure, the music arrangement in the songs played in *I am a Singer* is awesome:

The music arrangement, tone and style are so unique. Some are small bands, but some singers bring in a large group, like an orchestra. Pop music is being played even more stylish and fusion. I can never think of those interesting combination of musical instruments. It's not simply a singing contest, it's a music concert! (K. Fu, from Hong Kong, personal interview, 16 April 2016)

For band music enthusiasts, the reality singing contest integrates elements of live band shows that emphasizes not only the singer but also the music being played. Thus, each piece of song in *I am a Singer* can be appreciated separately as an aesthetic work. It is the craftsmanship in music treatment and harmonization contributes to the musical aesthetic that Fu finds appealing.¹

Informants from Hong Kong especially pay attention to the visual detail of *I am a Singer*, which is more spectacular when compared to the production of Hong Kong local television. The stage lighting similar if not identical to those installed in live music concert as Ng comments:

The first time I watch I am a Singer was the third season. The lighting effect is much better than I expect. In TVB's weekly pop music shows, you hardly see concert hall lighting. In I am a Singer, the background is in complete darkness. The singer has a spotlight on her with brilliant colour projections, very much similar to the lighting of live concerts in a stadium. The music show of Hong Kong television just gives you the sense of a studio, but the China show makes everything like a concert hall performance. (L. Ng, from Hong Kong, personal interview, 3 April 2016)

Ng believes that the concert hall lighting is differentiating *I am a Singer* from other music performance television programme in Hong Kong. He emphasizes the fascinating visual impact of 'concert hall lighting', which is an intertextual reference to Ng's experience in watching live music concerts in Hong Kong Coliseum, a venue known for top quality magnificent music performance. It is also this technical quality that contributes to the production of televisuality. The brilliant lighting effect resembles an excessive implementation of style and heavy exhibitionism, which is perceived by audience as the highlight of the reality singing contest and the climax of satisfaction. Attracted by the elements of televisuality, the informants in China and Hong Kong become loyal audience of *I am a Singer*.

Musicscape in consonance: connecting to localized cultural memory

Although the brilliant visual and audio presentation is fascinating to the informants, they are not persuaded to be a spectator. Audiences in China and Hong Kong actively associate the pop music performance to their cultural memory. The presentation of Mandapop and Cantopop in *I am a Singer* is appreciated by local audience in China and Hong Kong. The music speaks to the viewers' life experience and their sociocultural imagination. While youngsters in China ties the reality show to self-reflection of their status in the society, the Hong Kong viewers make stronger reference to cultural and political imagination. No matter in the Mandarin or Cantonese cultural linguistic

community, pop music articulates particular aspects of cultural identity and maintains solidarity of the youths (Frith, 1996).

Mandapop and the post-1980s identity in China

All of the informants are young adults who have finished their tertiary education, 2–8 years, and entered the labour market in Shenzhen, a highly competitive city with rapid economic development. The four seasons of *I am a Singer* have brought them shared feeling and imagination in their social role as post-1980s young adults. The Mandapop music in *I am a Singer* is meant to be encouraging and lifts the informants' spirit when they are feeling down. The notion of sympathy speaks to the informants' hard-working attitude in facing the unfavourable socioeconomic condition that downplays the post-1980s and restricts their life plan. Informant Huang likes Yunying Su's songs, and she is Huang's most memorable singer in the recent episodes of *I am a Singer*. To Huang's impression, Su comes from a humble background and without an admirable appearance, but she insists to prove her quality with her unique vocal style and songs that celebrates the toughness of youngsters:

It is the second time Su Yunying sings Yezi (wild child) in singing contest. The lyric has touched my heart and it echoes in my mind. It sings about overcoming difficulties in our life without fear, the wind blow harder we will be tougher. Unlike the inspirational songs that were so educational in the old days, Su's song is what I like. She reminds us to be tough. (J. Huang, from Hubei province, personal interview, 27 March 2016)

Huang has served for 5 years in his position as a hotel receptionist. He is upset for his stagnant career path development. Thus, Huang finds very strong association with the inspirational song. Yunying Su and her music are highly appreciated by the informants in China, and informant Lin feels Su's music speaks to post-1980s life:

Susu's (Yunying Su) music really compose for our generation. She writes in the emotion of post-80s. We are the underprivileged ... Often times, when there are trade fairs ... We juniors are assigned to work as usual in the showroom while the seniors make good commissions in the trade fairs. The culture is like that ... the seniors are advantaged. We lose at the starting line. (F. Lin, from Guangdong province, personal interview, 2 April 2016)

With the disadvantaged experience in his workplace, Lin identifies himself as the 'underprivileged' post-1980s, whom 'lose at the starting line'. As a sales representative of automobile in Shenzhen, he voices out strong discontent with his senior colleagues who exploit the juniors. Yunying Su's music addresses the notion of fearless and persistence is identified by Lin as representing the post-1980s' youth identity. Similar to Lin, Zhou likes the motivational song *Fei De Geng Gao* (fly higher)

This song is a bit old, but it's my favourite in this season. I heard of it during junior secondary school. I even performed this song with my whole class in a farewell show for the graduating senior year students. We created a dance for it. It's so encouraging, also my favourite karaoke song. (B. Zhou, from Zhejiang province, personal interview, 3 April 2016)

Fei De Geng Gao (Fly Higher) was released in 2005 and sung by Feng Wang, a Chinese pop singer. It is an upbeat music with the lyrics talking about breaking one's own limit to achieve the most in life. For Zhou, this music was used to cheer up the graduating students in secondary school, and after 11 years, she still sings it in KTV. It suggests that Zhou shares the message of the song and strives to fly higher in her life. In the interview, she talks about her uncertainty for staying in Shenzhen, a city with high cost of living. Zhou expresses that she has been working as a junior marketing assistant for 3 years without any clues for further promotion, nor a pay rise. She has a sense of hopelessness as it is too hard to wait for career opportunities in Shenzhen but hesitates to move to second-tier cities. It is this kind of motivational songs that lift her up to overcome the depression in everyday life. The tough and strong post-1980s identity is the typical perception of *I am a Singer's* Mandapop music among the young adult informants. Resistance, toughness and persistence characterize the affect and cultural memory of the young adults.

Domesticating Hong Kong identity with the relocalized Cantopop

Although most of the songs in *I am a Singer* are sung in Mandarin, the presence of Cantopop is not negligible. It is perceived by some of the Hong Kong local informants as upholding the status of Cantonese and Cantopop. Informant Ng, a 31-year-old accountant, finds that the most enjoyable part of the reality singing contest is the Cantopop:

I am not so familiar with the songs sung by those Taiwan and China contestants ... Cantonese songs are my favourite. The feeling is so special when listening to Cantonese songs in a Mandarin channel. It's like, 'oh, that's it, finally there is something I know!' (Ng, from Hong Kong, personal interview, 3 April 2016)

Cantonese pop music is highly preferred by Leo. It builds the proximity between Leo and the reality singing contest produced in Hunan, China. It is the language that pulls together Leo and the reality TV. A sense of joy is observed when he mentions 'oh, that's it, finally there is something I know!'. The Cantopop becomes an access point for Leo to culturally identify with the show. Despite the trivial portion of Cantopop in *I am a Singer*, informant Ho, a 25-year-old clerk, believes that it is the most important for her to appreciate the singing contest:

As I remember, there were songs of Beyond, Leslie Cheung, Alan Tam, Jacky Cheung. Hallmark of Cantopop. They are not my age, but there are many cover versions sung by younger singers recently... One must be familiar with them as a Hong Konger, such as Fung Gai Juk Chui (Breeze Keeps Blowing). It's the highlight of *I am a Singer*. (M. Ho, from Hong Kong, personal interview, 17 April 2016)

Throughout watching the four seasons of *I am a Singer*, Ho likes the songs of 1980–1990, the golden era of Cantopop. The aroma of Cantonese music is carried on by the re-sing versions to Ho's generation, a girl born in 1991. As she talks about her interpretation of the Cantopop she mentioned, a connection to cultural memory is demonstrated:

Fung Gai Juk Chui (Breeze Keeps Blowing) is romantic. It's about the sadness of breaking up and the pain of recalling the happy past. Now it is yearning for Leslie Cheung, and I think to some Hong Konger, recalling the good old Hong Kong, where becomes so miserable now. (M. Ho, from Hong Kong, personal interview, 17 April 2016)

There is an affective tie and the linkage of the past to the present, while the song itself also carries a sense of pessimistic romanticism. Cultural memory is hanged at a particular temporal point of history but transitive to the present through recitation (Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995). *Fung Gai Juk Chui* (Breeze Keeps Blowing) is performed by Hong Kong contestant Hacken Lee in the fourth season of *I am a Singer*. It was originally sung by Leslie Cheung in 1983. He is a legendary singer in Hong Kong and committed suicide in 2003. The reality singing contest is reinterpreted by Ho to recall her cultural memory of Hong Kong. In other words, Cantopop is relocalized in Hong Kong from Hunan, and become the cultural resources for Ng and Ho to reconstruct their sense of Hong Kong identity.

Audience's imagination of Hong Kong identity is tied with Cantopop, which also explains their preference for *I am a Singer* to other singing contests produced in China. Informants recall that it is the most enjoyable part of the show to listen to contestants from Hong Kong singing Cantopop:

I have to give credit to I am a Singer, it gives room to Cantopop ... They (singers from Hong Kong) do sing in Mandarin, but it's really not much and the titles are quite common and familiar. Some other singing contests in the Mainland requires Hong Kong singers to perform mainly in Mandarin, but then there is no point to have 'Hong Kong' singers in their show then. That counts into the openness of the Mainland stations, whether they really want to include Hong Kong as their market. (K. Fu, from Hong Kong, personal interview, 16 April 2016)

In Fu's explanation, he believes that the Cantonese bears the cultural connotation Hong Kong identity. The 'openness' of China's TV programme production is demonstrated by not only including contestants from Hong Kong but also allowing them to perform in Cantonese. Language is seen as an important cultural resource to reconstitute identity imagination. It is not a one-sided acceptance of Cantopop but a nuanced balance of a large portion of Cantopop assorted by 'common and familiar' Mandapop. Similarly, the performance of Cantopop also speaks for the singers' cultural identity as perceived by the Hong Kong audience:

One interesting thing in episode four is that, they categorize Coco Li as Hong Kong singer. But she performs in Mandarin and English for most of the time. To my understanding and memory, she sings very well in English. Then I get to know that she was born in Hong Kong and migrated in later years. It's like stretching the notion of 'Hong Kong singer' too much. I am really doubtful! (M. Ho, from Hong Kong, personal interview, 17 April 2016)

Audience create their own meaning of Hong Kong singer by associating it with the language of the songs performed by a singer. Coco Li is defined as a Hong Kong singer in the official discourse and the mediated text, but Ho finds it unconvincing and stretched the meaning of Hong Kong singer. In this example, linguistic proximity holds the key to the cultural identity of a singer as perceived by audience.

Musicscape in dissonance: consuming identity politics in dramatized singing contest

The content of *I am a Singer* introduces a narrative of competition within a reality show. The overarching narrative is a documentation of the production of a singing contest, and the dramatized narrative is the challenge between the professional singers from different regions. It creates an

even stronger tension than music award presentation shows. As the reality competition goes on for 14 weeks, audience are immersed into the story-like narrative structure. Audience in China articulate nationalist sentiment, while those in Hong Kong interpret the Hong Kong singers as planned losers. Informants' confrontational interpretation of identities incites them to keep up with the dramatized singing competition.

The nationalistic imagination of Chineseness in China

I am a Singer involves contestants from various regions of Asia, as the competition goes on only one singer can be the champion. Informants from mainland China perceive the show as a contest between nations in addition to the individual level of competition among the singers. In this level of interpretation, contestants are perceived not only as carrying his or her identity of pop singer but also as a representative of his or her country. In the eyes of the informants, *I am a Singer* is a battlefield between China and its counterparts, such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea and Malaysia. Informant Peng Huang, a 23-year-old web programmer, puts an analogy to describe the competition between China and Hong Kong singers:

At the final round, I certainly support singers from China, like the National Team in sports ... I remember last year the championship was competed among Han Hong and some mainland singers, a South Korean singer, and a Taiwan singer. Even though Han Hong is not the best, but voting for her is voting for China. It is the same for the second season. G.E.M. was doing good, but she's from Hong Kong. So, Han Hong won, and G.E.M. got the second, fair enough. Chinese support China. (P. Huang, from Sichuan province, personal interview, 4 April 2016)

In Peng Huang's interpretation, China and Chinese is an umbrella identity for mainland and Hong Kong people. During the interview, Huang recalls the joy of reunion when he was watching the handover of Hong Kong's sovereignty in 1997. In parallel with this memory, he feels that the internal competition between Hong Kong and China is not necessary. With his nationalist imagination, Huang's concern is whether China can outperform the other countries, and when comparing China and Hong Kong, he interprets the postcolonial Hong Kong as just a part of China. Thus, he appropriates a nationalistic perspective to interpret the result of the competition, in which Hong Kong should give way to China for the championship.

Alongside with the Sinocentric imagination, informant Xu, a 30-year-old sales representative, points out the over emphasis of Hong Kong taste leads to the failure of Hong Kong singers in the show:

Hong Kong contestants are just too insisted in Cantopop, hard to win. It won't work outside Guangdong, it's just KTV songs. Isn't it easier if they adapt to Mandapop, instead of having millions of mainland audience adapt to Cantopop? (L. Xu, from Shenzhen, personal interview, 23 April 2016)

Viewing *I am a Singer* with a nationalistic imagination, the reality singing contest is no longer an individual-based competition but an international contest. With this understanding, singer from the mainland China is more convincing and qualified to take the national pride.

The perception of planned losers of I am a Singer in Hong Kong

While the audience in China praise the success of mainland Chinese contestants in the previous seasons of *I am a Singer*, Hong Kong's young audience perceive an opposite meaning. They express a sense of desperation in watching the failure of the contestants coming from the Hong Kong entertainment industry. Their view on the reality singing contest demonstrates a notion of planned loser. Informant Ling Wong, a 28-year-old customer service officer, says Hong Kong people are always being ruled out half way of the season:

For Paul Wong, I think the mainland voters reject the local Hong Kong taste. For G.E.M. I really feel a bit unfair for her at that time. She can do high pitch, with a strong voice, and energetic on the stage... They just don't want to let China lose. Hong Kongers can perform on their stage, but can hardly get the championship ... (L. Wong, from Hong Kong, personal interview, 10 April 2016)

Wong feels that Hong Kong singers are being downplayed in the reality singing contest. The good qualities of Hong Kong contestants are easily neglected by the audience voters in the show. She adds that 'I have been watching *I am a Singer* since the first season and some similar programmes by other China satellite TV. I like music shows but you know there is really lacking live singing shows in Hong Kong' (L. Wong, from Hong Kong, personal interview, 10 April 2016). It is the scarcity of live pop music performance in Hong Kong local television that makes Wong keep on watching the trans-border television. She hates the hidden agenda of the reality singing contest and sympathetic view to the Hong Kong contestants, but there is no better option for her to enjoy Chinese pop music performance. It is under this scenario that constitutes the first facet of a planned loser imagination.

The imagination of a planned loser is also about audience's interpretation of the self-presentation of Hong Kong pop singer on China television. In watching the third season of *I am a Singer*, informant Jenny Mok, a 29-year-old service officer, is upset with her idol's self-mockery:

He (Leo Ku) pretends to be naughty and silly ... He is more trendy, smart and hippy in Hong Kong. He deliberately made fun of his Cantonese accent Mandarin. ... Perhaps it is to do with the affect of the mainland audience, it is their 'home court' and you are the 'away team' ... It is not easy to earn the Renmenbi, but Hong Kong is too small a market. (J. Mok, from Hong Kong, personal interview, 25 March 2016)

Leo Ku is a contestant from Hong Kong in the third season of *I am a Singer*. The act of making fun of himself is interpreted by Mok as unnecessary. As a local Hong Kong audience, Mok believes Leo Ku's motive is to suit the taste of audience in the mainland China. That is to dilute the cultural capital of a Hong Kong singer for acquiring a lower status in China. Such sense of Hong Kong inferiority matches with the sentiment of prosperous and strong China in the public discourse. Although there is a sense of discontent, Mok does not refuse such representation, instead she shows a sense of acceptance and associates with Hong Kong singers' practical needs to explore the China market. Thus, the planned loser imagination is shown as an internalized acceptance of deliberative downplaying of Hong Kong local culture, in conjunction with the strengthening tie with China.

The third facet of the planned loser imagination relates to audience reflexive interpretation of the reality singing contest. Similar to the sympathetic view towards the Hong Kong contestants, informant Marco Lam, a 26-year-old computer technician, suggests that he does not perceive the show as a contest but a typical singing show:

I think the show has its own storyline somehow. While earlier rounds are quite real, but as it approaches final, the championship goes to the predefined one, it is the China logic. I am especially sympathetic to the Hong Kong singers, probably they are the underdogs, or the selling point of the show. Towards the final, I watch it as a singing performance only. (M. Lam, from Hong Kong, personal interview, 16 April 2016)

Lam's view is more critical than the other Hong Kong local informants. He challenges the credibility of a singing contest hosted in China and suggests the singers to take the competition too seriously. It is because Lam wants to escape from the 'China logic', he deliberately treats the show as a singing performance to show his discontent towards the low votes of Hong Kong singers throughout the semi-finals and the final. Lam's experience demonstrates audience's agency in deconstructing and recreating the meaning of a reality TV.

Making fun with identity controversy

For most of the informants, the dramatized singing competition is intriguing, which motivates them to follow closely. Some of them find it enjoyable to guess the singer with the highest and the least votes. A group of loyal audience is gradually nurtured for this 2-hour television show. From the Chinese audience's view, they find it fun to watch the contestants from countries with a strong cultural industry being knocked out one after another:

Those singers from South Korea and Hong Kong must believe they are so hard to bit. But at the time when they are ruled out, you can see the shock on their face. Haha, they can't pretend to be smart and cool anymore! (P. Huang, from Sichuan province, personal interview, 4 April 2016)

Huang finds it entertaining specially to laugh at the failed singers from South Korea and Hong Kong. In his perception, singers from the areas with longer history of pop music would have a sense of pride, but the competition in China exposes the singers' weakness, as well as downplaying countries and regions like South Korea and Hong Kong, making them no longer 'smart and cool'.

Although the Hong Kong local informants have the feeling of a planned loser as associated with the narrative of the programme, they claim themselves as frequent audience. They develop an alternative way of enjoying the singing contest. Marco Lam finds it fun to guess the plot – the next singer to be eliminated (M. Lam, from Hong Kong, personal interview, 16 April 2016). Similarly, Ling Wong usually watches *I am a Singer* together with her family, and they used to guess who the live audience would vote for and against:

I was guessing Leo Ku would be eliminated, but not so early. To my surprise, he was kicked away in just one month! Then I guessed the next victim must be Taiwanese as there were no more Hong Kong singer, haha. This time I got it! (L. Wong, from Hong Kong, personal interview, 10 April 2016)

Wong shares the imagination of Hong Kong people as planned losers, and from this interpretation, she believes singers from the mainland are the planned winners. In this case, the tension of cultural politics is turned into cultural resources for amusement. While the narrative of the mediated text is about a competition for the best singer in the region, Wong recreates her experience of watching *I am a Singer* by predicting who the next loser would be following her understanding of the official discourse. Regardless of the critical views towards the cultural political issues in *I am*

a Singer, the informants find the dramatized reality presentation of singing contest intriguing and entertaining.

Regionalizing television show in the mode of televisual musicscape

I am a Singer is perceived by audiences in China and Hong Kong as a successful format of reality singing contest. From the perspective of the audiences, the tactical implementation of trans-border televisual musicscape provides better-than-expected audiovisual impact, for it is a locally produced programme in China. Audiences' satisfaction towards *I am a Singer* is enhanced by the abundant cultural resources of pop music that enrich their cultural imagination, as well as the dramatized excitement of identity politics in the process of tournament. In other words, televisual musicscape creates a flow of cultural memory to regional audience by performative qualities, articulation of contextualized cultural resources and regional identity politics. An illustrative demonstration of televisual musicscape is shown in Figure 1.

Televisuality is the mixture of exhibitionism with hybridized television genres. The excessive styling of *I am a Singer* is shown in the performative qualities: the energetic band sound, concert hall stage design and lighting style. It is the fundamental feature that individualizes and differentiates one production from the many in the highly competitive local, regional and even global television market. In this case, *I am a Singer* catches audience attention in China and Hong Kong with its unique audiovisual arrangement.

After generating attention, the core of the televisual musicscape approach is to engage with local audience through live performance of pop music. Music in its authentic and basic form articulates cultural memory, the inclusion of Mandapop and Cantopop bridges with the post-1980s identification in China, as well as the sociocultural imagination of Hong Kong audience. The songs touch the young adult informants in China for their toughness and persistence as an underprivileged group of post-1980s. For Hong Kong audience, Hunan Satellite TV revives the contextualized imagination of Hong Kong cultural identity. In this case, the televisual musicscape delocalizes Cantopop to regional level and reterritorializes it to Hong Kong audience. The embedded meaning of the delocalized Cantopop is more complex than its original form in Hong Kong. It requires Hong Kong audience's active interpretation to reterritorialize the contextual meaning of the performed Cantopop, so as to bridge with local cultural memory and recall the good old days. *I am a Singer* is filled with delocalized pop music that enriches the resources for cultural imagination of audiences in China and Hong Kong.

For a television programme that lasts for 3 months, the presence of a group of loyal audience is vital. It is also the feature of reality TV in generating prolonged audience attention through the docudrama narrative style (Bignell, 2005). Music in its dramatized form creates dissonance between China and Hong Kong. For the youth in mainland China, the text is identified culturally with an imagination of a prestigious China. On the opposite side of the border, young adults in Hong Kong develop a planned loser identification through linking the text to the imagination of imbalanced Sino-Hong Kong sociocultural relationship. Notwithstanding these contradictions, informants in both China and Hong Kong follow the reality singing contest closely. *I am a Singer* is reinterpreted by the audience as a dramatic narrative of a struggle between the planned losers and winners under their perceived cultural imagination and official discourse of identity controversies. It becomes an amusement for audiences to compare the result of each round of the competition with the persistent cultural and identity turbulence across the border. Chinese youths find it fun to

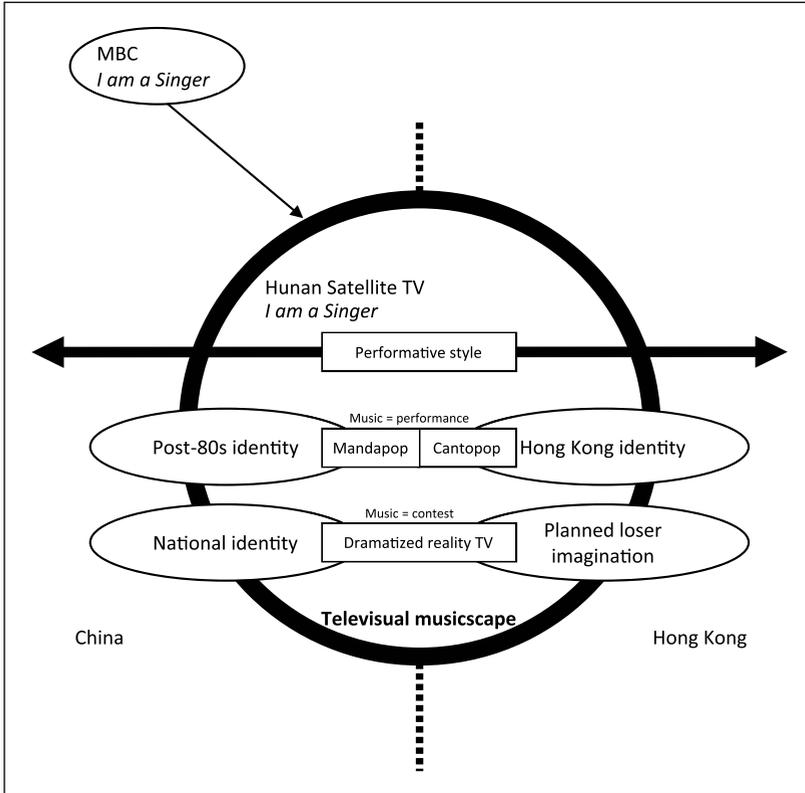


Figure 1. Trans-border televisual musicscape.

see the fall of renowned singers from presumably more advanced countries and regions, such as South Korea and Hong Kong. Hong Kong youngsters are excited in guessing the next loser under the hegemonic China narrative. As a result, audience across the border are eager to follow through the 14 episodes of *I am a Singer* and desire for an upcoming season.

Conclusion

Appadurai’s (1996) notion of mediascape describes the construction of an imagined world with the global dissemination of media content that blurs the real and the fictional, and anchors individuals’ sociocultural imagination. The concept of trans-border televisual musicscape extends the understanding of television’s function in constructing imagined communities (Anderson, 1983; Appadurai, 1996) to the regional dissemination of polysemous music-related television show that facilitates customized imagination of identity by the audiences themselves. Trans-border televisual musicscape refers to the flow of music-related television shows that presents music in its authentic form and dramatized form and decorates it with excessive format style.

The reception of *I am a Singer* in China and Hong Kong shows audience’s appreciation to the heavily stylized reality TV. The authentic presentation of Mandapop and Cantopop articulates local

cultural memory in their own cultural linguistic community. The dramatized music in the form of fierce diva tournament triggers identity politics between the mainland Chinese and Hong Kong people. Instead of risking audience's rejection of the show, such controversy is perceived as intriguing and dramatized plot of the docudrama that provokes continuous watching. Thus, understanding of audience's taste regionally is crucial to the implementation of trans-border televisual musicscape. In light of this, future research on the creative production of reality singing contests would add to the knowledge of innovativeness and creativity of regional television broadcasters in producing programmes for audience in the greater China region. In particular, production studies focus on how identity politics and cultural controversies are depicted and creatively integrated in the production of the docudrama narrative, which could enrich the understanding of the precarious creativity in the Chinese TV industry and its growing regional expansion.

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1. The music director of *I am a Singer* series is Kubert Leung, a Hong Kong professional musician whom started his career in the 1980s and worked with renowned Cantopop singers such as Eason Chan and Candy Lo (Yu, 2016). However, informants in the interview were not able to recall details of the music production talents.

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