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Miles Apart: An Investigation into Dedicated Online Communities' Impact on Cultural Bias

As a developer of any game project with a substantial fan following would tell you, the question "Is this game legal in China?" has become a norm at this point—in this case, the question refers to *The New Order: Last Days of Europe*, or TNO for short, a user-made modification of the strategy game *Hearts of Iron IV* that involves an alternate history scenario concerning an Axis Powers victory in World War II and its consequences. The game involves a great deal of Chinese history in the war with a substantial amount of sensitive material; fair, unbiased representation of my nation's past, therefore, becomes my duty as a writer on such a project, thus every China-related comment in our online communities matters.

Imagine my headache when a post containing the above question was the first thing greeting me when I logged into the TNO subreddit, a substantial part of TNO's online fan base and community. While framed as a question, the simple sentence "Is this game legal in China?" nonetheless forwards an implicit assumption: China, apparently, is a place where the legality of games is automatically called into question, as long as said games even tangentially touch on China itself. Such an assumption is partially untrue: *The New Order: Last Days of Europe*, at least, is far from banned in China, with large and dedicated communities of fans teeming with life on Chinese websites such as *Zhihu* and *Bilibili*. The truth, however, didn't matter; it certainly didn't stop the post from standing there, among the first few entries in the post list, staring back at me from the screen with more than five hundred upvotes—which, as this paper explains, is a

dead giveaway of just how much the question "Is this game legal in China?," as well as all the assumptions about China as a whole attached to it, has permeated this online community in particular.

The notion that games can easily be illegal in China shows characteristics of a bias, more particularly a *cultural* bias, in the sense that it reduces the nuances of Chinese citizenry, Chinese policy making, and Chinese perceptions on matters such as video games to a single, homogenous "China" label—despite the already heavy connotations of the term "China" to Chinese culture itself—and proceeds to assign unsavory or unfavorable characteristics to that same label. Those characteristics, therefore, become associated with an imaginary notion of a monolithic Chinese culture, despite the fact that Chinese culture, like other cultures, is very much heterogenous. These cultural biases, while at times not malignant at the surface, could breed disastrous consequences, as displayed by online xenophobia against Asians based on cultural misgivings during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dhanani and Franz).

The TNO subreddit, on the other hand, is a classic example of a dedicated online community—a platform to harness the capabilities of the Internet for the purpose of sharing and conversing, based on a unified topic or theme, with the impediments of distance and time removed from the equation. The apparent ability of culturally biased content to retain visibility and relevance in online communities, therefore, suggests a positive link between online communities themselves and the cultural biases being propagated in those communities.

It is thus in my interest, or the interest of any member of any culture, to ask: Is it true that dedicated online communities enhance the propagation of cultural biases? If so, how? What are the factors that might contribute to this problem?

While the tendency of online communities to form echo chambers is a crucial factor and, indeed, has been subject to repeated analysis for its role in the propagation of scientific information (Wang) and political rumors (Choi et al.), this study aims to provide additional insight as to how more intrinsic characteristics of online communities, and the digital infrastructure supporting them, might serve to exacerbate online cultural bias.

Methodology

The online platform chosen for analysis for the purpose of this study is *Reddit*, one of the most prominent social platforms among non-Chinese users but inaccessible to Chinese users. *Reddit* was chosen for its exemplification of dedicated online communities through the segregation of users into common-topic forums, or *subreddits*. Each subreddit lists a series of posts on its home page in a top-down fashion, with sorting order determined by a filter of the viewer's choosing: "Hot," "New," or "Top" with a variety of time intervals. The comment section within each post functions in a similar manner, with comments displayed in a top-down fashion and sorted through one among a list of filters. Furthermore, comments in *Reddit* are sorted by "parent" comments and "child" comments, the latter of which can be folded into threads within the former. As further analysis below shows, the sorting of posts or comments on *Reddit* is largely dependent on *upvotes*, a numerical value attached to each post or comment that goes up by one whenever a user presses an up arrow, and goes down by one whenever a user presses a down arrow. In this sense, upvotes are akin to *Twitter* likes in that both are intuitive visual indicators of user behavior. Thus this study foregoes utilization of aggregate statistics,

instead opting for direct observation of user comments and the number of upvotes they receive, as well as how those elements stand relative to each other.

The subreddits r/china and r/sino serve as extraordinarily appropriate samples of dedicated online communities due to their shared concerns with matters related to Chinese culture and politics.

Findings

One immediately noticeable difference between r/china and r/sino is the drastically opposing stances, mostly political, on their shared subject matter. To investigate the general opinion or stance of each community for reference, the "Top" + "All Time" filter combination was used to perform a forum-wide search in both subreddits. Several notable results are recorded in tables 1 and 2.

Table 1

Selection of Rankings on the Main Page of the Subreddit r/china, under the "Top" + "All Time" Filters, as of 20 November 2021[a]

Placement	Title (date of post)	Content	Upvote count
First place	"'Xi Jinping' upvote this so that people see it when they google Xi Jinping" (2018)[b]	A photo of Winnie the Pooh, posted with the implied intention of disrupting *Google* search results as an insult against China's current leader, in reference to an earlier Internet meme comparing Xi with Winnie the Pooh.	32,400

Fifth place	"After crying nonstop about how 'racist' it is for the West to say 'Chinese Virus' . . ." (2020)[c]	Screenshot of a *Global Times* report on an unknown disease emerging from Kazakhstan, with accompanying accusations toward Chinese state media for racism within the wording of the report.	4,300

a. *Reddit*, www.reddit.com/r/China/top/?t=all.

b. See mkb213.

c. See lebbe.

Table 2

Selection of Rankings on the Main Page of the Subreddit r/sino, under the "Top" + "All Time" Filters, as of 20 November 2021[a]

Placement	Title (date of post)	Content	Upvote count
First place	"Western Hypocrisy At Its Finest" (2020)[b]	Screenshot of two *Twitter* comments by the member of the European Parliament Roger Helmer: one decrying accusations that a variant of COVID-19 originated in the UK, and the other insisting that "Chinese virus" is a valid identifier. The post implies he is practicing a double standard.	3,800

a. *Reddit*, www.reddit.com/r/Sino/top/?t=all.

b. See "Western Hypocrisy."

What is immediately evident in the above findings are the generally opposite stances on Chinese and Western political and societal nature between the two forums—r/china being generally critical of Chinese state-related matters and the ruling Communist Party of China, and r/sino instead focusing on a supposed notion of Western hypocrisy. The upvote counts attached to those posts serve well as a general indicator of what is considered the most favorable opinion in either subreddit, or to a degree, a community-wide *consensus*. This drastic divergence in opinions is certainly intriguing, giving the almost identical subject matter between the two subreddits.

But it isn't just diverging political opinions that are being propagated; there is a deeper dimension where, as an investigation into the comment sections of several posts in both communities reveals, cultural bias is being propagated as well. In the comment section of the r/china post "After crying nonstop about how 'racist' it is for the West to say 'Chinese Virus'" (lebbe), one accusatory comment attacks the supposed intellectual inferiority of Chinese society in general ("and that's why a brainwashed hive-minded society falls behind in innovation" [CharlieXBravo]) and as of this writing had 103 upvotes, generally receiving greater visibility than clarifications by actual Mandarin readers (e.g., "It's quite normal for this news, the virus is not labeled yet" [Strict_Abroad], which received forty-one upvotes). In the comment section of the r/sino post "AmeriKKKa also has 'One Country Two Systems'" (FutureisAsian), which received 2,100 upvotes and links to a drawing accusing the US of discriminatory police practices toward George Floyd and Dylann Roof, there are four instances of the derogatory term "AmeriKKKa"—a conflation of "America" with the initials of the white supremacist organization Ku Klux Klan, essentially linking the concept of the US with KKK-esque racist and discriminatory practices—sprinkled throughout. The negative comments on both of these posts

reduce another nation or culture to a singular entity for ease of attack and, as upvote counts once again indicate, enjoy significantly more prevalence and visibility than other comments.

It is at this point that the digital infrastructure of *Reddit* makes its presence felt more than ever—its upvote system, as well as its ordering of posts and comments, seems to directly influence the prevalence and visibility of the above comments. As an attempt to intuitively observe the nature of such influence, table 3 records parent user comments below another r/china post that received 372 upvotes and that links to a report from CNN.

Table 3

Comment Rankings for the r/china Post "Exclusive: Taiwan's President confirms presence of US troops on the island" under the "Best" Filter, as of 20 November 2021

Display order	Comments	Upvote count	Visibility status
1	"This is the thing that will supposedly set Xi off, so I guess we'll see if his bluff has been called. I suspect it's mostly posturing on his side, but we'll see."	65	Visible
2	"The red line keeps moving."	50	Visible
3	"CCP must be furious, I am quite curious how they will respond"	6	Visible
4	"Why is this news worthy? No shit sherlock how do you think Taiwanese soldiers are trained how to use the equipment that they send billions on? some tech support guy? live chat?"	92	Visible

-4	"Taiwan is pathetic."	-23	Folded/hidden
-3	"Spenglerian pseudomorphism on Chinese soil"	-20	Folded/hidden
-2	"Taiwan being independent is like saying the isle of wight is it's not"	-9	Folded/hidden
-1	"You knuckle dragging countries and your little war drums. When will the masses see how useless and terrifying government is?"	-7	Folded/hidden

Source: "Exclusive: Taiwan's President confirms presence of US troops on the island." *Reddit*,

27 Oct. 2021,

www.reddit.com/r/China/comments/qh8yfo/exclusive_taiwans_president_confirms_presence_of.

In comparison, table 4 shows comments sorted by the "Best" filter under an r/sino post

that received 167 upvotes and that contains the same CNN link; the table tells a similar story as

table 3 but along a different political line.

Table 4

Comment Rankings for the r/sino Post "Exclusive: Taiwan's President confirms presence of US

military trainers on the island" under the "Best" Filter, as of 20 November 2021

Display order	Comments	Upvote count	Visibility status
1	"The reunification of China timeline just got accelerated!"	88	Visible
2	"This is bait for China. Provocation is what they want and they have already planned for China to	67	Visible

	react force vs force. China needs to counter with a Tai chi move"		
3	"So, she's calling US government liars, or they are calling her a liar. Either way, 'Democracy' are full of liars."	38	Visible
4	"So the US military is training them how to run like in Afghanistan."	47	Visible
-3	"Eh, this must've been the case for decades"	2	Visible
-2	"Lol. It's been known for more than a year and numerous reputable analysts agree Taiwans military is a paper tiger"	2	Visible
-1	"The US landed troops on Chinese territory, which is an armed invasion, and the CPC is doing nothing about it."	1	Visible

Source: Fix_S230-sue_reddit. "Exclusive: Taiwan's President confirms presence of US military trainers on the island." *Reddit*, 27 Oct. 2021, www.reddit.com/r/Sino/comments/qhbapk/exclusive_taiwans_president_confirms_presence_of.

The visibility status in tables 3 and 4 refers to the automatic obscuring by *Reddit* of certain comments, mostly those with negative upvotes, as displayed above, requiring the additional effort of clicking on viewers' part on the hidden post in order to be visible again. (In tables 3 and 4, a negative display order indicates a rank from last position: i.e., "-3" means third from last.)

The influence of *Reddit*'s "Best" filter on the sorting of user content, thus, has been apparently proven above. Comments that conform with the general community consensus are promoted to a higher display priority by *Reddit*, as is the case with the high-ranking comments on the r/sino post about the CNN report, which reflect r/sino's pro–People's Republic of China, anti-Taiwan stance (e.g., "The reunification of China timeline just got accelerated!"; see table 4). Comments that defy such a consensus are demoted to a lower display order or, in certain instances, hidden by default, as is the case with the explicitly anti-Taiwan comments (e.g., "Taiwan is pathetic"; see table 3) in the r/china post on the same CNN report. Given that the "Best" filter serves as the default filter, this means that without conscious effort by viewers to switch to other filters, such a sorting method, and therefore such an influence on conformity to the community consensus, would likely be what viewers are exposed to most of the time.

Analysis

There is an argument to be made that certain employment of language, especially in the context of online community platforms, enables cultural bias. Wen-Ying Sylvia Chou and Anna Gaysynsky, in their investigation of the post-pandemic online surge in anti-Asian sentiment on *Twitter*, elaborate on several observations that might aid in explaining the surge, among which one stands out as particularly of note: the power of stigmatizing language on public opinion (773), and the cohesive power of *Twitter* hashtags, here an example of the integration of language in online platform use, to "deliberately enact group affiliation," especially so when the words involved are pejorative (774). Language becomes doubly crucial as a framing device of circulated information—it reinforces existing patterns of interpretation, potentially damagingly

so with regards to the policies and cultural practices of a certain nation, as a plethora of sensationalist reports on Chinese cultural practices and skepticism of the Chinese government during the COVID-19 pandemic can attest all too well (Dhanani and Franz).

The power of stigmatizing language, and the cultural bias it breeds, only grows in the context of Internet communities. It helps forge a construct of what the "other" culture is supposed to look like, or at least what users of such language can *agree* it is supposed to look like: a consensus, rallying behind easy-to-consume descriptors such as buzzwords, which can be easily disseminated on online platforms such as *Twitter*. The word "AmeriKKKa," for instance, is short, evocative, reducing the US to something that treats black people poorly and little else (FutureisAsian); its relentless repetition throughout the comment section of the r/sino post "AmeriKKKa also has 'One Country Two Systems'" serves as increased exposure and in the process reinforces to viewers the idea that this caricaturized version of America is true. Not merely limited to *Twitter* or *Reddit* or any other online platform in particular, dedicated communities tend to find themselves entrenched in language that encourages the simplification of alien cultural entities into a homogeneous "other" and that, due to the instantaneous information transmission provided by online platforms, is able to efficiently sway the entire community toward such "othering." Hence, community-wide culture bias.

Yet the role of online platforms isn't just to enhance existing language simplifying and alienating other cultures; there is something within those platforms that enables the prevalence and swaying power of such language within communities. And, as further analysis suggests, the enabling factor might lie in the interface, the digital infrastructure of the platforms.

Online communities, as certain contemporary studies have attempted to show, are predisposed to becoming *echo chambers*—a "closed system or a group of users who share

similar interest and actively spread information to others, resulting in assimilation or even amplification of beliefs or memes" (Choi et al. 8). In their study of *Twitter*'s role in online political rumor propagation, Daejin Choi and colleagues have discovered a high degree of correlation in terms of polarity in political views between user subscription ("user polarity") and user-generated tweets ("content polarity"), congregating into what Choi and colleagues identify as two centerpiece characteristics of an online echo chamber: *selective exposure*, the tendency for social media users to "selectively consume information that [they] would like to believe" (2), and *political homophily*, or similarity in political viewpoints.

While largely agreeing with the apparent divergence of opinions between r/china and r/sino, the findings of Choi and colleagues largely concern user behavior, rather than the influence of the digital infrastructure of online platforms on such behavior, an influence that the *Reddit* upvote system clearly demonstrates. The function of the default "Best" filter for comment sections—lifting comments with generally considerable upvote counts to greater visibility and outright hiding certain comments with low upvotes, as seen in both r/china's and r/sino's posts on the CNN report—blatantly promotes selective exposure. The upvote count potentially provides visual gratification for users when more community members agree with them; the bigger the number, the better. In those two senses, *Reddit*'s interface actively *encourages* consumption of user content in line with the overall community consensus as well as conformity with said consensus in the act of posting. Homophily of opinions is achieved through this type of weighted consumption. The interface, as exemplified by *Reddit*, can play a role in facilitating online echo chambers and—if the largely enhancing role of echo chambers in the propagation of political rumors is any indication (Choi et al. 6)—can potentially fail to contain certain misconceptions from spiraling out of control. Therefore, were certain cultural biases, as with the

remark of China being a "brainwashed hive-minded society" (CharlieXBravo), to align with the consensus of the subreddit this remark is situated in, the natural conclusion is promotion by *Reddit* itself—which would prove problematic.

Conclusion

In short, dedicated online communities promote cultural bias in two ways, both of which concern an informal consensus of each community—what its members tend to agree on—regarding other cultures. Language serves as an efficient online rally point behind which consensus about "other" cultures is created, often to the degree of oversimplification and alienation, or "othering"; the digital interface on which those communities depend may also, intentionally or unintentionally, encourage the propagation of such consensus and by extension the cultural biases the communities may harbor.

The scope of this study is limited by its focus on the Sino-Western context; potential future studies may be free to investigate the impact of online communities on other contemporary contentious international topics and approach a more generalized conclusion. The choice of *Reddit* as the primary subject of study also limits the scope of this study since online platforms such as *Twitter* have different interfaces and different methods of sorting user content. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this study provides more profound insight into how online communities operate, how to handle the pitfalls of cultural bias, and how, ultimately, to approach fair and untainted cultural presentation in an online context. China, the nation I know, isn't just about banning games.

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