

Content Innovation, Character Building and Fan Economy:

A Case Study of Chinese Idol-Raising Talent Shows Youth with You Season 3

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Abstract: With the rapid development of fan economy in recent years, idol-raising talent shows have gradually occupied an important position in China's online video industry. Taking Youth with You Season 3 in China and PRODUCE 101 Season 2 in Korea as case studies, this paper tries to answer how Chinese idol-raising talent shows present and organize fan culture through the form of media texts.

Keywords: Youth with You Season 3; Idol-Raising Talent Shows; Fans Culture

1. Introduction

Beginning with John Fiske^[1], fans and fandom have become notable objects of study in popular culture, as he attempts to develop a positive view to interpret audiences within the traditional perspectives of elitism and pessimism. Henry Jenkins' Textual Poachers^[2], on the other hand, shows how fans can use existing texts to reproduce them and help them escape from the negative social evaluation through the concept of participatory culture. Thirty years later, as a result, video variety shows have emerged to meet the demand for idol worship and to show the process of mass production of idols, namely idol-raising talent shows.

Unlike traditional talent shows, the core of an idol-raising talent show is not a talent competition, but the making of an idol. Contestants show their charisma and accumulate fans through multiple rounds of competition. Correspondingly, fans buy peripheral products offline for their favorite trainees (i.e. contestants), vote as much as possible, create a good image online, hit various social media hit lists, and accumulate a deep virtual bond with their idols in the process.

Idol-raising talent shows have gradually occupied an important position in China's online video industry and become a revenue-generating tool for major video platforms. The mass production of idols in idol-raising talent shows can better focus on the characteristics of East Asian fan culture. However, compared to many scholars who focus on fan behavior nowadays, idol-raising variety shows for fans have not received much attention. This report follows the basic idea of fan studies, but focuses on the texts of variety shows, trying to answer how idol-raising shows in China present and organize fan culture through the form of media texts?

In order to answer the above questions, Youth with You Season 3 (Abbreviated as YWY3 in the following), which is the newest and hottest idol formation talent show in China in 2021, is chosen as a case study. YWY is co-produced by iQIYI1 and Caviar Communications2, and it is currently in its third season. Each season of the show selects nine outstanding (male or female) trainee groups to debut. Meanwhile, in order to get culturally specific answers, I have selected the second season of Korea's PRODUCE 101 as a comparison. In the following article, my analysis will be conducted on two parts: the image of the trainee and public opinion.

2. Localization and diversity: analysis of character in ywy3

In the homogenized trainee market, to stand out requires not only strength above others, but also a distinctive character identity and role setting, and a few trainees with outstanding personas are an important source of topics and popularity. I try to explain the reason and purpose of this by comparing the differences in persona creation between Korea's PRODUCE 101 and China's YWY3.

Table 1. Differences in the character roles of idols in Korean and Chinese programs

	<i>PRODUCE 101</i> Season 2	<i>YWY3</i>
Grind	×	√
Trainees who switch career	×	√
Ordinary but Confident	√	×
Female-oriented roles	×	√

In addition to the table, both debutants and those who have participated in other talent shows have been featured in the show, and the show's team has actively promoted the show in the community with the slogan "Don't give up" for such contestants.

However, faced with the trend of declining ratings of previous Chinese talent shows, iQIYI realized that viewers no longer buy into the same old emotional tactics and need to find another way to make talent shows revive. In the video program market in recent years, the emotional needs of fans who like boy love that have not been publicly satisfied have been explored, forming a CP (couple) culture. In such a context, iQIYI made CP a major selling point for YWY3. In the eighth episode of the show, the trainees were asked to write a letter to another contestant who wanted to practice the theme song with them, and the two who chose each other were formally formed into a group to practice in a one-on-one bundle in the next episode. This is the equivalent of confessing your love for each other on the spot. Thereafter, during the practice, the crew enhances their relationship by amplifying their conflict, reconciliation, physical contact, and verbal communication, allowing fans to gain emotional satisfaction. After gaining success, the two were frequently bound together in subsequent shows and gained long-term audience attention.

The appearance of the trainees is the second focus of the show regarding character building. The Panda Tang group, which was first unveiled in the initial ratings, were five slightly bloated boys, which were different from the traditional handsome image of idol raising shows, but still gained the approval of the audience and mentors. Placing them at the top reflects the novelty of the idol group that the show emphasized at the beginning, and Panda Tang's popularity not only shows the diversity of aesthetics, but also expresses the value of strength not being limited by image. In addition, their use of Sichuan dialect to sing their songs makes them special not only in terms of image but also in terms of their regional identity, further illustrating the show's pursuit of diversity.

3. Walk a tightrope: analysis of fan economy and public opinion of ywy3

In recent years, a digital fan culture has developed in Chinese social media. Fans gather in social media such as Weibo and become digital labors for their idols according to the data and algorithmic rules of the platform. According to Yin ^[4], this data contribution has become the reason for the gathering of fans, and the quality of data has become the target of competition among fans. digitalizing fandom has not only brought about the widespread dissemination of secondary production of texts in the traditional sense, but also brought about competition and even attacks among fans. At the end of April 2021, Tony Yu, a popular contestant of YWY3, was reported to have been involved in pornography and drugs at the KTV of his parents, and Tony Yu, who had been sitting at the top of the list, was branded as the "child of drug-dealing parents". This has led to a flood of abuse and demands for the contestant Tony Yu to withdraw from the competition.

On May 4, 2021, a video was left in social media in which fans of YWY3 poured entire cartons of uncapped milk into the gutter in order to vote for their favorite trainee. When the "Anti-Food Waste Law" came into effect on April 29, such wasteful behaviors as pouring milk and leaving bottle caps were widely criticized by public opinion, and official

media such as Xinhua News Agency, People's Daily, and CCTV News entered the public opinion arena to criticize the irrational star-chasing behavior. In fact, this is not the first time such a thing has happened. Behind the milk drinks that are closely bound with the casting vote, a "milk cover" industry chain has been born. In this industry chain, the milk drink is wasted, fans are second harvest, brands and intermediaries are earning a lot of money, while the idol that fans are so concerned about is "unemployed".

In accordance with the relevant regulations governing network audiovisual programs, the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Radio and Television ordered iQIYI to suspend YWY3 and contestant Tony Yu withdrew from the program. The program has not resumed so far and is basically declared dead.

4. Conclusion and discussion

Through the analysis of the above two parts, this report draws several conclusions as follows. First, YWY3 is trying to be responsive to the unique cultural aspirations of all types of viewers. In addition to offering a rich variety of idol types, the show also attaches some additional cultural symbols to the contestants. The presence of contestants like Panda Tang in the show confirms this. Second, YWY3 embodies a clear platformism. During the show's broadcast period, iQIYI monopolized the broadcast and voting platform, tying risk and revenue with the talent show series system. iQIYI's talent show was able to survive on capital for four consecutive years. Third, fans are still nominally the central service object of the program, and the traditional fan culture model is still in play. Fans move from consumption to participation in the growth process of the show's contestants by voting and buying peripherals. Fourth, the idol talent show is a concentrated manifestation of the intervention of state control power. From a direct point of view, the latter part of YWY3 broadcast by contestants Tony Yu and pour milk incident, the deputy director of the State Internet Information Office Sheng Ronghua in the State Council press conference said that the need to rectify the online entertainment and hot ranking chaos, after which the state called a halt to YWY3 catalog system. The above conclusion shows that although the idol-raising talent show is a new cultural form as the base logic, it still reflects a strong conservative nature. The economic demands of the program make it necessary to satisfy as many audiences as possible, thus making it difficult to break through in terms of content. The political environment of the show makes it necessary to conform to censorship and regulation as much as possible in order to survive. If we understand the event from the opposite perspective, as Van Dijk^[3] and others argue, the platform is not an elaborate social institution, but a dynamically negotiated set of social relations. YWY3 accurately reflects how video platforms have actively or passively connected governments, markets, and users through the content of their programs.

The future of idol-raising talent shows in China's internet platforms has become grim in light of the negative public opinion generated by YWY3. On the one hand, both outright bans and strict controls are likely to emerge in the future. On one hand, this is a tragic ending and illustrates the natural contradiction between the current Chinese fan economy chain and the external regulatory environment. On the other hand, if idol-raising talent shows are banned from airing, what new media products will fans' needs shift to, what new models will be generated, and what new interactions with other structures of society are the topics I hope to focus on in the future.

*NOTES

One of China's top three Internet video platforms

² A media company that produces mainly variety and entertainment content, and has produced several idol-raising talents shows

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