

## RESONATING IDEOLOGIES: THE ROLE OF MUSICAL REALITY TV IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

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### **Abstract**

*In contemporary China, reality television shows have emerged as significant cultural products that reflect and shape societal values and beliefs. This essay explores how popular culture serves as a potent medium for the dissemination and contestation of ideologies, focusing specifically on the Chinese musical reality shows “Singer 2024” and “Infinity and Beyond”. Utilizing Althusser’s concept of ideology and Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model, the research investigates how these two shows function as ideological apparatuses that both reinforce dominant cultural and political ideologies and evoke emotional resonance among viewers, elucidating the intricate interplay between media, ideology, and society.*

**Keywords:** Reality Television Shows, Popular Culture, Ideology, Encoding/Decoding Model.

### **I. Introduction**

For years, popular culture has served as a powerful medium for the dissemination and contestation of ideologies. Early 20th-century cinema and radio were used as propaganda tools by Soviet and Nazi filmmakers and WWII-era radio broadcasts boosted national morale. During the Cold War, US television reinforced democratic and capitalist values. Late 20th-century globalized popular culture, including Hollywood films and pop music, spread Western ideologies worldwide. The digital age has further transformed ideological dissemination, with social media enabling rapid, widespread ideological communication and content creation. In contemporary China, reality television shows have become significant cultural products that reflect and shape societal values and beliefs. Musical reality TV show “Singer 2024” and “Infinity and Beyond” produced by Mango TV are closely regulated to ensure alignment with state cultural and political objectives, reflecting and shaping societal values through encoded messages that resonate with viewers.

This essay, applying Althusser’s concept of ideology and Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model, examines how these musical reality shows function as ideological apparatuses to explore the complex interplay between media, ideology, and society in contemporary China.

### **An Overview of Theoretical Framework 1.1 Althusser’s Concept of Ideology**

French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser is known for his contributions to Marxist theory, particularly his ideas on ideology and its role in society, which is the greatest contribution to cultural studies. His concept of ideology departs from traditional Marxist thought by emphasizing the ways in which ideology functions to maintain and reproduce the conditions of production in capitalist societies. In his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, Althusser provides an account of ideology which involves three related points: that “Ideology is a ‘representation’ of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser 375); that “Ideology has a material existence” (ibid 378); and that “Ideology interpellates individuals as subjects” (ibid 382). This first point states that ideology helps individuals make sense of their place in the world, providing a coherent narrative that connects them to their social conditions and interactions, even if it doesn’t always fully reflect the complexities of those conditions. The second points that ideology is not just an abstract set of beliefs but is embodied in our daily practices and institutions. It “always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices” (ibid 378), which is what Althusser calls Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), such as schools, churches, media, and families. The rituals, customs, and behaviors that individuals engage in within these institutions give ideology a tangible, physical form. The last point is that “ideology functions

by turning individuals into subjects” (Strinati 142). For Althusser, “the subject is the defining feature of all ideology, and all ideology works by taking individuals and placing them, that is interpellating them, as subjects within the framework of ideology” (ibid). This process helps individuals understand their place in society and feel connected to the larger social structure, fostering a sense of belonging and purpose.

### **Stuart Hall’s Encoding/Decoding Model**

Stuart Hall, a prominent cultural theorist and sociologist, is known for his work in media studies and his role in developing the field of cultural studies. In his 1973 essay “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse”, Hall introduced the Encoding/Decoding model, in which encoding is the process by which media producers create messages with specific meanings, influenced by their own social and cultural contexts, intended to convey particular ideas or values, and decoding is the process by which audiences interpret these messages based on their own social and cultural contexts. And the messages conveyed must be “appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded” (Hall 165) in that “it is this set of decoded meanings which ‘have an effect’, influence, entertain, instruct, or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences” (ibid). Yet as Hall puts it, what producers intend to express and what receivers interpret “do not constitute an ‘immediate identity’. The codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical” (ibid 166). Thus, Hall offers a “hypothetical analysis of some possible decoding positions” (ibid 171)—the first is “dominant-hegemonic position” that “the viewer is operating inside the dominant code” (ibid), that is, the audience fully accepts the intended meaning. Second, “negotiated code or position” that the audience partly accepts the intended meaning but also interprets it based on their own experiences. Third, “oppositional code” that the audience completely rejects the intended meaning and interprets it in an alternative way.

Hall’s model highlights that the process of encoding and decoding media messages is deeply intertwined with ideology. Producers embed ideological meanings into media content, which audiences then interpret in ways that either reinforce or challenge these ideologies. This interaction shows how media serves as a battleground for ideological struggle, where dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings reflect the ongoing negotiation of meaning and power within society.

### **Case Studies**

As John B. Thompson says in his *Ideology and Modern Culture* (1990), the development of mass communication has greatly expanded the scope of ideology’s operation in modern society, as it allows symbolic forms to be transmitted to large, dispersed potential audiences across time and space. Musical reality shows are platforms for disseminating and contesting ideologies. Using Althusser’s and Hall’s theories, this section examines how “Singer 2024” and “Infinity and Beyond” encode and audiences decode dominant ideologies, revealing the role of these shows in shaping societal values and beliefs in contemporary China.

### **“Singer 2024”: Music as Bridge to Resonate Globally**

#### **Show Overview**

After a four-year absence, Mango TV, owned by China’s Hunan Province TV station, releases the show “Singer 2024”, with seven initial singers delivered stunning performances. Sticking to a “live-broadcasting” format devoid of post-production edits is one of the biggest selling points of this season. Another selling point, unlike previous ones, is that this year’s contestants include not only renowned local Chinese artists such as Na Ying, Wang Sulong and Taiwan-born singer Rainie Yang but also American singer Chanté Moore and Moroccan-Canadian Z-generation singer Faouzia. The breathtaking performances not only secured the show the top spot in viewership ratings but also dominated major online rankings, showcasing the immense popularity and influence of “Singer”.

#### **Encoding of Ideological Messages**

To align with the nation's core values of respecting the diversity of world civilizations and promoting cultural coexistence, expanding into overseas markets and enhancing international communication and cultural exchange are key focuses for Mango TV this year. As the show's chief director, Zhang Danyang, mentioned in an interview, diversity and coexistence are central themes of "Singer 2024". The inclusion of international singers this year is an innovative attempt to allow the audience to experience the interaction between Chinese music and world music ("Literary Criticism: 'Singer 2024'"). Upon the background of a "beautiful diversity" of the music civilization community, we can see the show has "encoded" many messages in innovative ways, such as the "ranking challenge" format and new interactive mode for audience participation.

As one article highlights, "Singer 2024" uses music as a bridge to resonate globally, enhancing cultural exchange between Chinese and international music with its innovative "ranking challenge" format. For instance, the significant addition of Adam Lambert to the show not only demonstrates the show's respect and appreciation for the music of all nations but also serves as a heartfelt "invitation" to the world. By inviting overseas singers, the show continues to bring international musical cultures to domestic audiences in the upcoming ranking challenges. Moreover, Mango TV has upgraded its mobile platform with a new interactive mode, enabling extensive audience participation. Viewers and online judges can choose their preferred camera angles while watching the live broadcast and make real-time predictions about the competition rankings. This new feature enhances the immersive and interactive experience, allowing the audience to be involved throughout the show. On all accounts, the program is dedicated to creating the ultimate audiovisual experience, using top-tier equipment to deliver a concert hall-quality music experience to global music fans. From being mere audience to being active participants, it could be argued that the show, as an ideological apparatus, serves first to place individuals as active "subjects" in order to interpellate them as promoters of "beautiful diversity" value, from which we can learn that "ideology functions by turning individuals into subjects" (Strinati 142).

### **Audience Decoding and Reception**

According to Hall's "three hypothetical positions from which decodings of a televisual discourse may be constructed" (171), this section demonstrates how "Singer 2024" is interpreted by audiences with different identities, and then develops the reception of different audiences.

The dominant-hegemonic position constitutes most viewers' position on the show. Many Chinese netizens commented that "Singer 2024" makes Chinese music go abroad, and some even commented that the program is "a global stage with global attention". There are also voices from abroad, such as Rozette, a Canadian vocal expert and youtuber, spared no words of praise for Na Ying's performance in her video, with commenting Na as a great singer with a very stable voice, showing a high degree of control over her voice, and complimenting her even as a very good singer, she doesn't show off her skills. Just as what Chinese Embassy in US posted in X, "Music touches the hearts. It has no boundary". According to experts in the industry, such cross-cultural exchanges not only strengthen the program's watchability and enhance its internationality through the introduction of high-level foreign variety resources, but also open a new window to show the excellent Chinese culture to the world.

Then audience in the negotiated code can also be seen from mixed reviews of Chinese performers after the show's first episode. For instance, the format of live broadcasting in the singing competition deserves applause. However, "it also exposes the predicament in which the Chinese music industry finds itself. While the two foreign singers confidently commanded the stage and clinched the top two positions, domestic singers struggled with nerves during the performance" (Li, "'Singer 2024' show a wakeup call for Chinese music industry"). In Weibo, Chinese counterpart of X, speculations ran rampant regarding which skilled artists might step in to fill the gaps left by the eliminated singers. Some even began speculating about the future of the Chinese music industry, questioning who could potentially rescue its current state.

Audience belongs to the oppositional code indicates “he/she detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference” (Hall 173). In “Singer 2024”, due to the exceptional performances of the overseas singers Chanté Moore and Faouzia, contrasted with the less impressive performances of the Chinese singers, some viewers started heated discussions using keywords like “resist foreign invaders” and “fifty-year-old woman (Na Ying) defending the nation”. Netizens further joked about Na Ying’s Manchu surname Yehenala, widely sharing lines from the TV series “Towards the Republic” spoken by Empress Dowager Cixi: “I want the foreigners dead”. What began as playful banter about the singing competition transformed into a discussion charged with nationalistic sentiments (Li, “Resisting Foreign Invaders on ‘Singer 2024’”). Moreover, controversy aroused over the show’s invitation to a singer who openly supports Israel to participate in the show, and the show’s subsequent statement that he could not participate in the show due to his schedule. All these contradictions reflect a strong confrontation between decoders (the audience) and encoders (the production team), failing to meet the program’s expectation.

### **“Infinity and Beyond”: Music as Bond to Cohere Chinese National Spirit**

#### **Show Overview**

“Infinity and Beyond”, premiered on Mango TV in 2022 with subsequent broadcasts on Hunan TV and Hong Kong TVB, is a multi-dimensional music competition which blends online and TV formats and features 16 singers from Hong Kong and mainland China. Divided into male and female teams, the show reinvents classic Hong Kong hits through six themed competitions, exploring the resonance of Hong Kong music across eras and engaging viewers in both creating and reminiscing about the enduring spirit of Hong Kong music. While focusing on Hong Kong music, the show also highlights the emotional expressions and historical imprints reflected in the songs. By interspersing interviews, documentaries, and clips from classic films, the program vividly showcases the creative process and unique characteristics of Hong Kong music at specific points in time. This approach not only helps the audience appreciate the golden hits of Hong Kong music but also enhances cultural aesthetics, thereby enriching the show’s cultural value and appeal (Liu 41).

#### **Encoding of Ideological Messages**

Hong Kong pop music, as a brilliant precursor to Mandarin pop, is deeply embedded in Chinese cultural heritage and connects the pop culture memories of generations. Against the backdrop of the 25th anniversary of Hong Kong’s return to China, in 2022, “Infinity and Beyond” paid tribute to the spirit of the era through iconic Cantonese and Hong Kong hits, enhancing the cultural exchange between mainland China and Hong Kong and tracing the development of Hong Kong music in the context of the new era.

About the setting of the program, there are also innovative messages that are encoded in two ways—first, bridging generational boundaries, and second, transcending spatial boundaries (“Literary Criticism: ‘Infinity and Beyond’”). To foster intergenerational resonance and build emotional connections through music, “Infinity and Beyond” covers a broad and deep range of musical selections. Unlike a talent show, it focuses on performing classic works and sharing the stories behind Hong Kong music. The performance formats in the show feature both solo and group performances, including collaborations between Hong Kong and mainland singers as well as between senior and junior artists. For instance, in the song “Monica”, released more than 20 years ago, the 18-year age gap between CoCo Lee and Mike Tsang did not hinder their passionate interaction. Their duet perfectly embodies the concept of “new renditions of old songs”, breathing new life into classic hits and subtly depicting the warm relationship between senior and junior artists. As for the second way, “Infinity and Beyond” airs simultaneously on Hunan TV, Mango TV, and TVB, creating cross-platform content synergy. Also, the hosts of the show are renowned presenters He Jiong and Wong Cho-lam. This arrangement, featuring one host from mainland and one from Hong Kong, effectively enhances communication between singers and audiences from the Greater Bay Area and mainland China. Both approaches transform Hong Kong music from a mere noun into an expansive verb that connects online and offline worlds.



For Althusser, “what people represent to themselves in ideology is not their real world as such but their relationship to the real world” (Strinati 141). “It is this relation which is at the centre of every ideological, i.e., imaginary, representation of the real world” (Althusser 377). As an ideological apparatus, “Infinity and Beyond” utilizes Hong Kong music to provide an “imaginary relationship” to the real world by presenting an idealized version of Chinese unity and pride. Listeners might not directly experience the broader socio-political dynamics of China, but through music, they can emotionally and ideologically connect to the concept of national spirit. By listening to Hong Kong music that embodies national themes, Chinese people are encouraged to see themselves as part of a larger national story. That is to say, the music interpellates them into an ideology that emphasizes cultural pride and national unity, reinforcing their relationship to the real world through an emotional and ideological lens.

### **Audience Decoding and Reception**

The dominant-hegemonic position of the audience shapes the viewer stance in “Infinity and Beyond”. This dominance is “the ideal-typical case of ‘perfectly transparent communication’” (Hall 171) that positively influences the audience’s feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. As a result, viewers seek out the musical emotions and language conveyed by the show. They perceive the program as more than mere entertainment; it holds greater significance and value compared to other music shows, especially during the final chorus section in every episode. Since its premiere, the show has been widely praised in both mainland China and Hong Kong. The program’s philosophy, “with music, mountains and seas pose no barrier”, consciously resonates with the audience’s deep sentiments regarding Hong Kong’s return, leading to relatively high acceptance and recognition of the program.

As for the negotiated mode, some audience shared mixed views of the program. In “Infinity and Beyond”, the ages of the singers range from post-2000s like Shan Yichun to post-1940s like George Lam. The songs span from timeless classics to contemporary hits, making the show appealing to all age groups. This alignment reflects the program’s audience concept and core philosophy. However, when it comes to musical preferences and opinions, there are some disagreements and conflicting views. For instance, some audience find certain song adaptations strange and much worse than the originals, and some singer rankings do not match their expectations.

A small portion of the audience for “Infinity and Beyond” holds relatively negative views that differ significantly from the show’s production team. They believe the song choices are too conservative, with the majority being widely known classic oldies, and there is a lack of songs by new-generation Hong Kong singers and lesser-known tracks. Some also feel that the Cantonese pronunciation of some mainland singers is not accurate, affecting the overall performance of the songs. These conflicts create a strong opposition between the encoders and decoders, resulting in a lack of emotional resonance with Hong Kong music for these viewers.

## **II. Conclusion**

The penetration of mass media into private life spaces has altered the previous environmental differences that people experienced, breaking the “shared context” basis of transmission and tending towards uniformity. This has resulted in a greater separation between information producers and receivers, allowing more people in different contexts to receive and share the same programs and content (Huang 22). Musical reality television shows “Singer 2024” and “Infinity and Beyond”, operating as ideological apparatuses, have become pivotal cultural products that mirror and influence societal values and beliefs, demonstrating how popular culture serves as a powerful medium for both the dissemination and contestation of ideologies. For instance, “Singer 2024” promotes the diversity of world civilizations and cultural coexistence by featuring international artists alongside local talent. This initiative not only enriches the show’s cultural fabric but also reinforces the importance of global cultural respect and exchange. Meanwhile, “Infinity and Beyond” resonates with audiences’ deep sentiments regarding Hong Kong’s return, using music to bridge generational gaps and foster a sense of shared heritage and identity.

“With music, mountains and seas pose no barrier”. Music has the power to resonate with people across great distances. Musical reality programs not only reflect and disseminate current societal values but also have the potential to influence and change certain social phenomena. Therefore, musical reality programs, as a form of popular culture, should acknowledge the audience’s perspective during the decoding process and continuously examine the production process with a critical eye. This involves understanding the coherence between encoding and decoding processes and exploring resonance with the audience from multiple dimensions, including historical value, emotional impact, and cultural significance, which are keys to a program’s success and reflections of remaining true to its original aspiration.

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