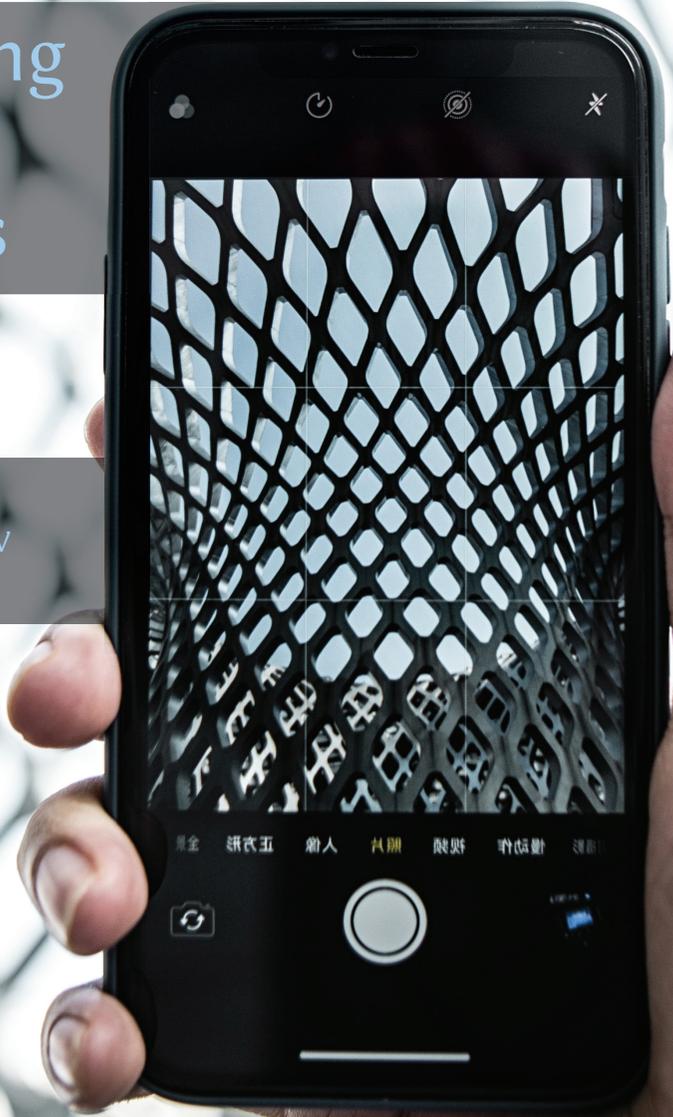


Introducing Vigilant Audiences

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Contesting the Vulgar *Hanmai* Performance from Kuaishou: Online Vigilantism toward Chinese Underclass Youths on Social Media Platforms

Jiaxi Hou

Introduction

In November 2017, Chinese cyberspace was outraged after a group of middle-class parents alleged that their children were forced to strip naked and jabbed with needles in a Beijing kindergarten. Since 2010, more than sixty similar cases of child abuse have been reported in news media and Internet sites, not including other incidents concerning children's well-being, such as food or vaccine safety issues.¹ This outrage was prevalent on various social media platforms, including the dominant Sina Weibo² and WeChat³ and other platforms more popular

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- 1 English reports of the news can be found at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/24/world/asia/beijing-kindergarten-abuse.html>, or <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-42105443>
 - 2 Though with significant differences in user behaviors (Gao et al., 2012), Sina Weibo and Twitter are two comparable micro-blogging platforms, where public discussions occur. The monthly active users of Sina Weibo reached 462 million by the end of 2018. The data can be retrieved from its business report at <https://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2019-03-05/doc-ihxncvvh0033063.shtml>
 - 3 WeChat is a mobile application with multiple functions: instant messaging, voice and video call, social networking, gaming and mobile commerce. 86.9% of China's

with the middle class, such as Zhihu and Douban.⁴ In the widespread agitation against the suspected teacher and the related institutions, an underclass⁵ *hanmai* [shouting with a microphone] performer, Tianyou, also expressed his anger in a short music video that he produced. Yet comments about Tianyou's work were extremely polarised compared to the contributions of other participants in the general outrage. On Kuaishou, the video-clip-sharing platform where the *hanmai* video was initially circulated, Tianyou was greeted with applause. However, when the video was shared on other social media platforms, their comment sections were filled with insults and rebukes, such as: "you should graduate from primary school first before you dare to say anything" or "do not show off your disgusting vulgarity in front of the public".⁶

Why were opinions so divided on different social media platforms? Why was Tianyou treated as unqualified to participate in online public discussions through *hanmai* videos and why did people transform him into an object of denunciation? These were the first empirical questions of the study. Firstly, it is necessary to have a basic understanding about what *hanmai* is, its connection with the platform Kuaishou and its place in contemporary Chinese digital culture. A vocal performance with

802 million Internet users used *Pengyouquan* [Moments], the social networking function of WeChat, while the Subscription Accounts function allows individuals, media institutions, enterprises and the government to establish their own official account. The data can be retrieved from the 42nd China Statistical Report on Internet Development by China Internet Network Information Centre in July 2018 from <http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/>

- 4 From a Western perspective, Zhihu looks like a Chinese version of Quora and Douban shares some similarities with IMDb. Though official user data is lacking, the two platforms are perceived as attractive to urban middle-class users, especially those who have received a high level of education. Descriptions and individual analysis about the characteristics of users of Zhihu or Douban can be found in online discussion posts such as <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/51561339>, or blogs <https://news.newseed.cn/p/1336055>
- 5 The term underclass in this study includes various social groups, from peasants to rural migrant workers and from laid-off workers in small towns to youth with limited educational resources. In general, it refers to the disadvantaged social groups in transitional China. Rather than referring to a social group of restricted scale, the term underclass might cover over half the general population of China (Li 2005).
- 6 These comments were posted when Tianyou's video was shared on Bilibili.com, another large video sharing social media platform in China. These comments are no longer available online now because the video was deleted, but they were recorded in the fieldnotes of the researcher on February 14, 2018.

musical accompaniment, *hanmai* is usually circulated through online video clips. The characteristics of *hanmai*, including the emphasis on the rhyming lyrics, the rhythmic background music and frequent use of MC as the title of the performers, might remind an unfamiliar spectator of the style of rapping in African-American hip-hop culture, though both the *hanmai* community and the Chinese hip-hop community refuse to admit the similarities. *Hanmai* was first generated and mainly circulated on Kuaishou, one of the largest social media platforms in China with over 700 million registered users, characterised by a video sharing function. Because of the large user base of the video-centric platform, the user-generated visual artefacts on Kuaishou are highly diversified. Nonetheless, *hanmai* is the only genre that co-evolved with the platform since its launch in 2014; it is barely tolerated on other social media platforms because of its 'vulgarity'.

This study attempts to examine not only what is expressed in *hanmai* videos by the young Chinese underclass today, but also why and how *hanmai* was collectively resisted as vulgar by vigilant audiences from other social groups. Through empirical exploration, it tries to explain how vigilant practices, including denouncing, shaming and humiliating, can be utilised to exercise disciplinary force and contribute to the class-stratifying process. The study should be understood in the contemporary Chinese context, where not only was consensus around values and principles absent from a society undergoing drastic change, but digital technologies, especially social media platforms, were deeply embedded in these dynamic social changes. The study identifies different forms of online denunciations in the class-stratified public dialogue: underclass youths utilised affective and rhetorical denunciations of the upper social classes to construct their social identities; and the middle-class condemned the aesthetic and moral inferiority indicated by the 'vulgar' *hanmai* videos. The visibility of *hanmai* had once empowered the previously silent underclass group, but it was also utilised by the middle-class audience as a weapon in user-led vigilantism, triggering cooperation between the government and private corporations to formulate a new form of visibility for underclass youths to replace the 'vulgar' *hanmai* culture.

The study uses digital ethnographic methods to track the developments of the *hanmai* culture on Kuaishou, from its emergence

as the collective self-representation of the young Chinese underclass, to the explosive denunciations it received and eventually its gradual disappearance under the cooperative surveillance of the state, the platform and society as a whole. I obtained the data for this research during a two-year observation period from December 2016 to December 2018, from four primary sources around the assemblage of Kuaishou and *hanmai*. This intentional integration of varied or even conflicting sources of data followed the principles suggested by multimodal ethnography, in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how meanings are constructed in the multimedia world (Dicks et al., 2006). The first component of the data was collected through a repetitive “walkthrough” of Kuaishou, in order to identify the application (app)’s relatively closed technical system and how users interact on it (Light et al., 2018).⁷ Secondly, I collected forty-eight videos of *hanmai* works with their lyrics transcribed, in order to find out how the underclass youth actually expressed themselves using *hanmai* videos and what they said. Thirdly, I sought out different forms of online discussions related to *hanmai*, especially those containing denunciative discourses, including blogs and posts on Sina Weibo, WeChat, Zhihu and Douban. These data did not just reflect the realities of digital denunciation; they could also help to capture the imbrication between the technologically mediated and the physical worlds (Murthy, 2008). Fourth, I conducted semi-structured interviews with sixteen individuals from related groups who participated in this *hanmai* culture and the online vigilantism that targeted it, including the performers and spectators of *hanmai*, hip-hop followers, users of the other social media platforms who posted comments about *hanmai* and programmers from the Kuaishou company.⁸

7 “The walkthrough method is a way of engaging directly with an app’s interface to examine its technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users and shapes their experiences. The core of this method involves the step-by-step observation and documentation of an app’s screens, features and flows of activity — slowing down the mundane actions and interactions that form part of normal app use in order to make them salient and therefore available for critical analysis” (Light, Burgess, & Duguay, 2018, p. 882).

8 In the following sections, thirteen of the interviewees allowed me to translate their Chinese Internet pseudonym into English; the other three preferred a completely new pseudonym.

The Social and Cultural Context of the Underclass *Hanmai* Culture

First, it is essential to clarify the position and social significance of *hanmai* culture in the contemporary Chinese context. For both their lovers and their haters, *hanmai* videos were the first prevalent format for the self-representation of the young Chinese underclass. During the last decade (as of June 2018) Chinese mobile Internet users have increased to 98.3% of the overall 802 million people who are able to access the Internet,⁹ thanks to the availability of low-end smartphones with cameras and the gradually decreasing telecommunication tariffs. Access to the Internet is no longer the privilege of college students, or the middle class who live in the metropolis. Technological progress has provided the basis for the visibility of disadvantaged social groups that were previously silent in Chinese cyberspace.

What identifies the underclass is not a straightforward question that can be easily answered with census statistics of the population's income, ethnicities, occupations, educational backgrounds or origins; it is much more complicated than that. One finds discrepancies between realities and imaginations, between a person's own sense of their (multiple) identities and how they are perceived by others. Moreover, the situation may be further complicated as China is still a drastically transitioning society, where there is hardly any consensus about either the standards of social class stratification or the norms of each specific social group. One possible solution might be to differentiate the two terms about class most commonly used in the Chinese language. One is *jieji*, which evokes particular concepts such as peasants, workers and capitalists within the Chinese Communist Party's Marxist-Leninist ideology (Goodman, 2014). The other is *jieceng*, which denotes stratum or strata and has been adopted in the twenty-first century to describe social stratification after the recent economic reforms (Lu, 2002). Though the latter is more resonant today, the historical legacies of *jieji* must not be overlooked, the most significant being the strictly enforced house registration system — to give it its Chinese term, *hukou*. From 1955 until today, the *hukou* system segregates the general population

9 The data can also be accessed at <http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwzxbg/>

into two groups of residents, the rural and the urban, according to their birth places and family locations. The rural/urban division in the *hukou* system still plays an important role, not only in contributing to general income inequalities (Xie & Zhou, 2014), but also in framing people's identities and perceptions within the class system (Afridi et al., 2015).

Mobility used to occur mostly within each of the two groups before the 1980s. The forty-year economic reform transformed the geographical and temporal migration between the countryside and city with great ease. However, it is still difficult to change the attribute of one's *hukou* within the strict binary of the rural/urban system. In general, rural populations might have enjoyed reputational prestige during the communist experiment, but they were inferior in economic and material aspects compared to the urban citizens (Li, 2004a). As a result, while the rural residents (and especially the peasants) might nominally rank high in the *jieji* system, the forty-year economic reforms saw them decline to the level of the underclass under the concept of *jieceng*. Until the end of 2018, over 288 million people with rural *hukou* were working in cities.¹⁰ These elites from the rural region not only faced exclusion from the primary labour market, the welfare system and the social networks of the cities, but they also lived in a precarious rift between the two reconstructed social stratification systems because they were perceived as an underclass in their new surroundings (Li, 2004a).

Nonetheless, although they are an essential aspect of the Chinese underclass, rural migrant workers are not the only component. Much more diversified social groups are closely connected to the Chinese underclass, thanks to the enlarging inequalities in contemporary Chinese society (Sun, 2003). For example, rapid urbanisation has uprooted numerous rural residents and transplanted them to newly constructed towns and cities by directly issuing them with the urban *hukou*.¹¹ These passive immigrants are often unable to adjust immediately

10 The data can be retrieved from the National Bureau of Statistics of China, http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201902/t20190228_1651265.html

11 To better facilitate economic development, the Chinese government has been working to replace hundreds of millions of small rural homes with newly constructed high-rises in towns and cities so as to improve the general population's living standards and also enlarge the consuming class of city dwellers. Related reports can be accessed from <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/16/world/asia/chinas-great-uprooting-moving-250-million-into-cities.html>

to their new urban surroundings and find it difficult to establish themselves, even with the financial compensation from the government (Li, 2004a).

Secondly, the drastic economic reform among state-owned enterprises since the 1990s has created over ten million unemployed workers, who form part of the impoverished urban population. Being laid off from the state-owned factories and businesses does not simply mean losing a stable job, but also the sudden loss of access to the welfare system, ranging from healthcare to a child's education. Thirdly, the forty-year-long economic reform has anchored part of the class stratification in Chinese transitional society (Li, 2004b) and therefore this period has witnessed inherited poverty and marginalisation among the younger generation. For example, the migrant workers' temporary working status has divided millions of rural families, as most of the children are left in the village alone or with their grandparents while their parents work thousands of miles away, providing only financial support during their childhood. These children eventually come to face their own life choice: whether or not to join a new generation of rural migrant workers.

These different groups used to be regarded as unrelated categories within the larger framework of the underclass (Lu, 2002) or subordinate class (Goodman, 2014). Though these different groups shared commonalities in economic status such as monthly income, they hardly constructed a collective class consciousness (Solinger, 2012). In the media, they are usually depicted distinctly, with a different focus depending on the context. For example, the rural migrant workers, the most central group within the underclass, are usually presented as the laughable 'other' in urban cinemas, avoiding any discussion about the structural inequalities, in order not only to pursue commercial success among the urban audience, but also to accord with the state's media policy to represent a harmonious society (Sun, 2014). On the other hand, the laid-off workers are depicted more as the pathetic 'others,' as their suffering is perceived as a direct consequence of the structural social transitions (Liu, 2016).

The prevalent access to social media platforms such as Kuaishou emerged in this social context, when the younger members of the underclass could, for the first time, take out their mobile phones, record themselves and publicise their own videos online. This process

also contributed to the emergence of collective identities that were no longer shaped by the boundaries among different groups within the underclass. Contradicting the stereotypes in traditional media, the young underclass concentrated on themselves, their social realities and recorded their dreams and ambitions in the *hanmai* videos. At its peak, tens of thousands of *hanmai* videos were created and shared on Kuaishou, while many more spectators were viewing, liking, commenting and tipping¹² each other within the community. As the superstar of *hanmai*, MC Tianyou used to have over forty million followers on Kuaishou, who called themselves soldiers in his army. However, the explosive visibility of this subculture among the young underclass also attracted attention and opprobrium from other social groups, especially urban, middle-class Internet users.

Reconstructing the Underclass on Social Media Platforms

Though the technological foundations for the visibility of the underclass can hardly be neglected, the current study assumes that the Internet technology and social media in particular, is created, configured and used by human beings in specific social contexts (Fuchs, 2014). Meanwhile, the process of supporting daily activities online is so complicated that these things should be interpreted as mediators rather than intermediaries (Latour, 2005), which profoundly contribute to affecting our imagined perception of the differences between the online and offline world. In other words, the main theoretical concern of this study is to investigate how the Internet, with its platform characteristics and the Chinese class-based society are mutually shaping and shaped by each other within an intricate network, using the empirical case of *hanmai* videos on the Kuaishou social media platform and the vigilante

12 Tipping, or *dashang* in Chinese, refers to viewers buying virtual gifts to reward the creators. The specific affordance and behaviour on Chinese social media platforms not only largely affects the social interactions between the viewers and creators (Lee et al., 2018), but also contributes to changed business models, as the donations form a large proportion of the revenues of social media companies. Related reports can be found at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-02-17/inside-chinas-lucrative-livestreaming-industry/10810788> and <https://view.inews.qq.com/a/20170706A06C2200> (in Chinese).

practices that followed. Refusing the platform's claim to be a neutral, objective and reliable "mirror of the authentic world" (Zhang & Zhou, 2017), I interpreted this claim as a strategic metaphor that aimed not only to circumvent any obligations to answer to regulatory demands, but also to justify their services in negotiation with different types of users and government departments: in other words, to suggest that, as a platform, Kuaishou simply facilitated users' online expressions without intervention.

The paradigm that neutral social media platforms reflect social realities fails to capture the dialectical relationship between technology and society. Moreover, it is especially contested in the case of Kuaishou and its use in a transitional Chinese society that is characterised by economic as well as ideological cleavages (Sun, 2003). By regarding Internet technology as socially constructed, the current study assumes different social media platforms with various technological affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) are gaining implicit power in assembling different online communities and facilitating cultural activities. Therefore, different platforms attract users with different backgrounds, with the result that various values and principles are cultivated in the vigilant practices targeting *hanmai*.

On the other hand, the study also refuses to regard the identities of the underclass as reflections of objective social positions, but assumes that such identities are conferred on subjects (Lawler, 2004). Some literature addresses the engagement of the Chinese underclass with digital technology by concentrating on how disadvantaged social groups might be empowered by the Internet. For example, as a result of the annual commute among rural migrant workers between cities and villages, mobile devices are brought back to the villages. These not only construct new social ties among the rural residents but also provide benefits by connecting them with the resource-rich urban areas (Oreglia, 2013). Besides these material advances, previously disadvantaged rural workers can also use the mobile phones to "see the world" and gain an imagined sense of mobility by being online with some level of autonomy (Wallis, 2013, p. 3). However, my study is not restricted to the specific underclass group of rural migrant workers but is framed by the notion that the identities of the underclass are reconstructed in the dynamic negotiations between themselves, others and technological

platforms. It relies on the Bourdieu's theoretical basis that classifying operations are dynamically classifiable practices rather than objective actions (Bourdieu, 1984). Expanding from Bourdieu's analysis in fields such as education, lifestyles and cultural tastes, the integrated concepts of capital, field and habitus could be applied in the realm of online space (Ignatow & Robinson, 2017).

This research regards the members of the *hanmai* community as taking part in a dynamic process of self-construction, being recognised, in particular by middle-class Internet users, as having emerging collective identities as underclass youths. Such a process is not only made visible in the production and circulation of *hanmai* videos, but also through the online denunciations targeting them. The precarious situation that the young Chinese underclass are facing is significant, both in itself and as an insightful empirical context to understand how digital technology contributes powerfully to class stratification (Sterne, 2003). Moreover, this study also examines Kuaishou and other social media platforms as a digitally mediated field with implicit values, norms and rules embedded in its technological affordances. Habitus, in this study, refers not only to our ways of being in the world (Bourdieu, 1984); it also takes humans' perceptions of technology into consideration. Visual materials have always been important to understand how habitus affects people, because elements that are hard to verbalise or articulate are contained there (Sweetman, 2009). Thus, the platform of Kuaishou concentrating on the creation and spread of videos can serve as a good field for us to understand the nuances and complexities of habitus in the Chinese class-stratifying process.

More specifically, this chapter departs from previous literature in its attention to the practices of vigilantism in the process of class stratification. The theoretical basis of digital vigilantism in this study is consistent with the definition that it is an ongoing process, in which people are collectively offended by others and respond by collaborative revenge, with certain patterns of actions afforded by digital technology (Trottier, 2017). In this case, the vigilant audiences, mostly composed of middle-class Internet users, were offended by the visibility and 'vulgarity' of the underclass youths in the virtual space. Therefore, practices of shaming, denunciations and humiliations were widely utilised in the dialogue among the different social groups, in order to exercise disciplinary force and social control (Kasra, 2017). In particular,

the sudden visibility of an underclass with their own agency did not necessarily serve to empower a previously disadvantaged social group, but might also lead to misrepresentation, denunciation and regulation (in the Foucauldian sense of surveillance) of the original visual expressions due to the dynamic power structure (Brighenti, 2007). Moreover, the underclass youth (rather than any specific individuals) were the collective target of the online vigilantism in this case, which differs from other studies (cf. Cheong & Gong, 2010). When the targets of collective denunciations shift from specific individuals to categorised social groups, the mechanisms of the vigilant practices and the power negotiations behind them also change.

The Affective and Rhetorical Denunciations in *Hanmai*

Although it is widely recognised as a result of social media platforms, in the eyes of many *hanmai* followers, *hanmai* is consistent with various cultural practices from the pre-digital age. The essential characteristic of online *hanmai* videos is the reading or recitation of improvised rhymed lyrics with musical accompaniment. Not all *hanmai* performers necessarily shout into their microphone according to the term's literal meaning; nonetheless, the term 'shouting' underscores that the lyrics are of greater importance than the other musical or visual elements in *hanmai* videos. Concentrating on this feature, some *hanmai* followers, such as Jia (2017) and Zhong, interpret current *hanmai* culture as an adaptation of traditional Chinese oral storytelling performance, especially the form that arose from the folk cultures popular in North China. Comprising a wide variety of speaking and singing arts, Chinese oral narrative entertainment has not only survived for more than a millennium, but possesses specific features in local dialects from various regions (Boerdahl, 2013). In particular, the frequent use of playful doggerel in *hanmai* lyrics shares significant commonalities with *errenzhuan* [the rotation of two people], the ancient telling and singing art form that still plays an important role in the entertainment of Northeast rural residents (Ma, 2019).

Others, such as Tang (2017), propose that online *hanmai* performance actually evolved from its offline origins in the 1990s, when nightclubs gained popularity among the younger generations. Unlike the nightlife hotspots intended for the benefit of overseas tourists and investors in

metropolises such as Beijing and Shanghai (Farrer, 2008), the nightlife spaces in small cities and rural regions were characterised by a hybridity of karaoke, dancing and DIY (Do-It-Yourself) elements (Chew, 2010), so that it was necessary for microphone controllers, or MCs, to excite the crowd with improvised and playful rhymed words in the gaps between different songs. Despite the divergences in exploring the origins of *hanmai* culture, the fact that its offline basis is closely connected to the social and cultural atmosphere of rural and small city residents from the north cannot be neglected, even though digital technologies have largely enhanced its range of circulation and might also have altered its elements, notably from the perspective of *hanmai* followers.

Either the traditional *errenzhuang* art form or the nightlife in rural regions have embedded *hanmai* performance in underclass culture, and such connections are also articulated by both *hanmai* creators and its audience. At the beginning of many *hanmai* videos, or in the comments at the bottom of these videos, it is repeatedly mentioned that only *laobaixing* [people with hundreds of surnames] can understand the real meanings of the *hanmai* lyrics. According to the *Modern Chinese Dictionary*, *laobaixing* refers to ordinary people who are not soldiers or government officials, but the *hanmai* community reclaimed this term for themselves. MC Changjiang described himself as a *laobaixing* because he quit school at the age of twelve and used to work twenty-one hours a day as a construction worker and a dishwasher in order to survive. MC Yushao characterised the *laobaixing* using the true story of one of his followers who had to break up with his fiancée because he could not offer 500 thousand Chinese yuan as the betrothal gift. However, *laobaixing* is not used only by the *hanmai* community. Diverse social groups can use this term self-referentially, or they can be described as *laobaixing* by actors in the media landscape, ranging from the cosmopolitan middle class, to rural migrant workers and to Chinese emigrants living overseas. The significance of how the *hanmai* community interprets the word is that they add a sense of relatively lower economic and reputational status to the original meaning, to emphasise themselves being powerless in contemporary Chinese society. Nonetheless, even within the *hanmai* community there are differences in understanding about exactly what constitutes the underclass from the perspective of employment, the economy or respectability.

Identifying themselves as a collective group of *laobaixing*, *hanmai* creators usually incorporate denunciations toward other social groups in their lyrics. Particularly the upper social class, composed of government officials, the rich and some morally degraded intellectuals, are constructed as the imagined objects deserving censure. In MC Tianyou's *hanmai* video, "*Laobaixing Has A Word to Say*", which triggered the middle-class denunciations in the Beijing kindergarten case described in the introduction, he severely condemned the suspect teacher in his lyrics:

You were the hope for our national rejuvenation
 These young flowers once sang for you
 But now you abuse them, assault them and torture them
 Without any hesitation
 [...]

 I am not a good person, but I am human
 Your hypocrisy has made you lose your soul¹³

A clear distinction has been drawn between *laobaixing* and the stigmatised upper class. Consistent with how pop music may affect the identities of young people in the other social contexts (Frith, 1996), the emphasis on social class in *hanmai* lyrics reproduces differences in identities. Röttger-Rössler et al. (2019) argued in their study that visual artefacts were particularly effective at representing young people's affective relationships and emotional feelings, especially when the youths felt that it was difficult to verbalise these experiences. Similarly, participating in *hanmai* culture by either performing or viewing these videos constructed the collective consciousness of the underclass on the basis of affection rather than rationality. The young underclass expressed hardly any clear expectations for structural reform, or practical strategies for social change, in order to defend their own rights, topics that were relatively prevalent in young middle-class Chinese online discussions (Fu, 2019). The young underclass chose to underline their intensified emotional feelings, such as anger, yearning and desperation, in their *hanmai* culture, and never talked about how their situation could be improved.

13 The original video is no longer available online. However, thanks to YouTube user Bee at Kwai's efforts in making an archive of *hanmai* videos, we can still see the reposted video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SryWoHxqpH8&>

Moreover, as a user-generated genre, participation in *hanmai* culture is not limited to viewing the videos, but also includes the interactions within the community and a flexible shift between being a creator and a spectator, as barriers to participation have broken down. This active participation contributes to the sense of belonging inherent in this new identity, which renders the group distinct from those they criticise in their lyrics. Regarding *hanmai* as a vernacular creation embedded in their real-life experiences, the community weighs social class as the more significant distinguisher to construct their identity, rather than gender or sexuality (Whiteley, 2013) or ethnicity (Grgurić & Janković-Paus, 2018), which dominate in other global contexts.

The difference of identities between the powerful and the powerless is sometimes conveyed rhetorically. Authority is usually portrayed using iconic symbols such as the Buddha or an emperor, fictional or distant figures in traditional Chinese culture, rather than current government officials or the rich. To symbolise themselves, the community idolise Monkey King as the representative of *laobaixing*. The main character in the sixteenth-century Chinese classical novel *Journey to the West*, Monkey King has always been an important rebel figure because his experiences in challenging the Buddha and the Jade Emperor and pursuing personal freedom have been retold many times in popular adaptations in film, anime or TV series. The importance of Monkey King is so significant in *hanmai* culture that there is even one specific Monkey-King voice within the vocal styles of *hanmai*; a bestial, hoarse and sharp voice in a particularly high tone. In MC Qixing's work, "Buddha Says", this vocal style was utilised organically together with the lyrics to express the anger and confusion of Monkey King, a protector and also a spokesperson of *laobaixing*, when he tried to challenge the authority of the Buddha.

Buddha, open your eyes and see these ugly faces
 The evil are waiting for reward but the good are begging for
 forgiveness
 Buddha, I believe in you but where on earth are you
 I have walked for hundreds of thousands of miles
 You tell me you are in my heart
 Buddha says turning back and I can see the shore
 I go back but I don't have a home anymore¹⁴

14 Again, the original video is no longer available but the reposted version can be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cyOdouZ48o>

Through the affective and rhetorical criticisms of the upper class, the imagined adversary of *laobaixing*, underclass youths' anger and confusion were expressed in the lyrics and cherished by the online audience. The audience understood that these lyrics spoke out the innermost feelings of Monkey King, whereas in the original work, it is well known that Monkey King was gradually disciplined by his master during the arduous journey from China to India to search for the truth of Buddhism. The comment section of *hanmai* videos on Kuaishou was usually suffused with praise, acknowledgement and support. The most frequent remark is either 666, a popular Internet slang term on Kuaishou that means 'awesome', or *laotie* [buddies], an intra-community appellation indicating the intimate relationships among the users. Even though some MCs mark their videos as 'original' if they write the lyrics by themselves, they always encourage other competing MCs or the viewers to perform the song freely themselves or to paraphrase the lyrics. The distinction between the upper class, depicted as the blameable 'others' in the lyrics of *hanmai*, and the *laobaixing* themselves, are further reinforced by the affective interactions within the community.

Besides the Monkey-King voice, other popular vocal styles indicate the different categories of the content and also different ideologies behind the lyrics. For example, the 'emperor' voice is usually used in a *hanmai* work when the ambition of social mobility is underlined, while the 'alcohol and tobacco' voice usually emphasises the sufferings from intimate relationships caused by class boundaries. Creating, performing and viewing *hanmai* videos have transformed their exploration of the emerging underclass identity into a constantly changing process of performativity. Moreover, the lack of dialogue between the *hanmai* community and an imagined upper class has deflated the denunciative discourses in *hanmai* lyrics, and at the same time, positions *hanmai* as self-referential, and as something that entertains its own group. However, the rapidly increasing visibility of both *hanmai* and Kuaishou has evoked antagonism among other social groups, which means that the previously non-vigilante denunciations in *hanmai* lyrics have transformed the *hanmai* community into the subjects of large-scale online vigilantism led by middle-class Internet users.

Hanmai Being Denounced: from Ignorance to Multifaceted Vulgarity

The similarities between *hanmai* performances and rapping in African American hip-hop culture boosted the former's visibility. Neglecting the *hanmai* community's identity as a local culture rooted in underclass lives in rural regions of North China, some hip-hop lovers identified *hanmai* as a localised Chinese hip-hop culture. For example, one hip-hop fan, Xiao, compared MC Tianyou with a popular Chinese rapper, GAI, arguing that both of them have depicted the street life of the young underclass based on their real experiences.¹⁵ A music critic and producer, Liang (2017), also argued that *hanmai* might be closer to the initial spirit of authenticity in African American hip-hop culture, compared to Chinese hip-hop, because *hanmai* was actually generated by the underclass, while contemporary hip-hop culture was more attractive to urban middle-class youths as it resonated with their cosmopolitan lifestyles (Kloet, 2010). The identification of the similarities between *hanmai* and hip-hop rapping, rather than the denunciations in the lyrics of *hanmai*, infuriated the Chinese hip-hop community. Xiao's personal page on Douban was soon inundated with comments stating "*Hanmai* Is Not Hip-hop" together with insults towards Xiao, MC Tianyou and the whole *hanmai* community. Similar offensive discourses toward *hanmai* arose on platforms like Sina Weibo, Zhihu and Douban.

The hip-hop community originally began to denounce *hanmai* performers because of the lack of originality in their music, the simplicity of their 'flow',¹⁶ and their ignorance of intellectual property protection. A hip-hop group, Xinjiekou, accused the whole *hanmai* community of plagiarising flows from Chinese hip-hop musicians. They created a rap song entitled "*Fuck Hanmai*", on Sina Weibo in order to provoke collective resistance against *hanmai*. By denouncing the supposed offences carried out by the *hanmai* community (which included not only plagiarism, but also their rural backgrounds and their rustic tastes) the previously

15 Xiao shared the experience with the researcher in an interview held on February 2, 2018.

16 Though rappers seldom define the term, 'flow' is an important element for the audience to judge the qualities of hip-hop music. It usually describes the rhythm of the music and the rhymes of the lyrics and how well the two elements interact.

unknown hip-hop group gained popularity and reaffirmed the class differences between *hanmai* and rapping. Ironically, when the fact that Xinjiekou itself had also been involved in dozens of copyright disputes was disclosed by hip-hop fans, the hip-hop community was not collectively mobilised to reach a consensus in resisting *hanmai* using vigilante rap, as Xinjiekou had expected. Xinjiekou is not an exclusive case, as hip-hop culture has evoked legal and intellectual property controversies from its very beginning due to its sampling practices (Self, 2001). Nonetheless, ignorance of copyright was the initial cause of the hip-hop community's denunciations of *hanmai* culture. Vigilant practices have served as one of the key distinctions with which the middle-class hip-hop community differentiate themselves from the underclass *hanmai*.

This denunciation of *hanmai* attracted wider public attention from more diverse middle-class Internet users. Unlike the hip-hop community's anxiety to differentiate themselves from the *hanmai* community, the wider middle-class public was astonished by the extent of vulgarity in *hanmai* videos. On Zhihu, thousands of questions and answers were posted to discuss why *hanmai* was so vulgar and what consequences would emerge if these vulgar works continued to be popular among the younger generations, in order to provoke collective resistance to *hanmai*. Interestingly, the content of *hanmai* actually contained much less profanity or vulgarity compared to American hip-hop culture (Taylor & Taylor, 2007). We may ask what 'vulgarity' means when the word is prevalently used in the public denunciations targeting *hanmai* culture and community. This study identifies three layers of meaning intended by different users of the term 'vulgarity': the aesthetic, the moral and the technological.

Aesthetic Vulgarity

The immature vocal style, the monotonous rhythm, the substandard recording facilities and the garish filters together constituted the reasons that middle-class Internet users' denounced *hanmai*. One of the most unacceptable features was therefore its low quality from an aesthetic perspective, especially when compared with global hip-hop culture. Preference for the latter indicated a modern and cosmopolitan cultural taste that could always keep up with the global trends (Kloet, 2010),

while being a *hanmai* follower was denounced using terms like ‘rustic’ and ‘vulgar’. Such comparisons between *hanmai* and hip-hop could be particularly popular in shaming and humiliating discourses. For example, to answer the question what is the difference between *hanmai* and rapping, answers such as “hip-hop is like the food you eat for dinner but *hanmai* is like the shit you try to get rid of after you eat” or “hip-hop is a genre of modern music but *hanmai* is what the ancient homeless say when begging” received hundreds or even thousands of likes and supportive comments. Denunciations of *hanmai* in the name of vulgarity could be interpreted as a class-stratifying practice in Bourdieu’s sense of the distinction through cultural tastes (Bourdieu, 1984).

However, from the perspective of a *hanmai* lover, it was the simplicity of *hanmai* that attracted *laobaixing* to participate in this online culture, because all it required was to write what they wanted to say, organise the words using rhymes and recite them before a webcam with a musical accompaniment. For those who did not want to write their own lyrics, all the lyrics written by acknowledged MCs were ready-made and openly shared within the community for everyone to use. The *hanmai* community did not even feel the aesthetic humiliations as the middle-class vigilant audience expected. When asked about how he felt about being compared to a beggar, MC Tianyou answered from a different perspective: “[Beggars] work hard to create the rhymes, get some praise and also receive some money from the audience. What is wrong with being a beggar?” The aesthetic denunciations seemed to miss their destination, as the *hanmai* community perceived their vernacular creations as closely connected to the traditional Chinese folk culture within their own context. Nonetheless, the denunciations not only further reinforced the boundary between different social classes with different cultural tastes, but also increased the visibility of *hanmai* culture in public discussions.

Moral Vulgarity

The visibility of *hanmai*, escalated by increasingly widespread public denunciations, triggered more attention from a middle-class, vigilant audience, who later regarded these videos as proof of the moral degradation among the underclass youths and worried about their

social influence. Although *hanmai* videos lacked straightforward profanity or offensive language, they were still perceived as vulgar for being a potential threat to existing moral values and public interests. Rather than directly condemning the aesthetic inferiority of *hanmai*, denunciatory discourses about the moral aspects of *hanmai*'s vulgarity were combined with disgust, but also sympathy. For example, a freelance columnist with the pseudonym Crocodile argued that the vulgarity of *hanmai* was socially constructed, as a reaction to the fact that upward mobility was highly restricted for the underclass youths: "[y]ou will feel helpless when you watch these *hanmai* videos, you know? You can do nothing, and they can do nothing either, because they don't have any hope in their life. You can just feel it from their vulgar lyrics".¹⁷

Denunciations also indicate conflicting expectations and values about how the underclass youths should behave among the middle-class vigilant audiences themselves. For example, Liu, a Sina Weibo user, argued that current *hanmai* works indicated the loss of traditional values such as diligence and endurance, which were cherished among the older generation of rural migrant workers, because the underclass youth now spend too much time dreaming about defeating fictional emperors and replacing them. Elsewhere Tong expressed her particular dislike of the intense yearning for upward social mobility expressed by the young underclass using symbols of traditional Chinese culture on WeChat. The appropriation of symbols and languages from traditional Chinese culture was either considered as disrespectful and ignorant towards the orthodoxy of traditional culture, or as a refusal of modern values. These different or even contradictory perspectives contributed to the multi-layered meanings of vulgarity in condemning the whole *hanmai* culture, as the term might have different meanings for different members of the vigilant audience. The lack of proper moral values was the significant charge in this case of public vigilantism against *hanmai* culture. This echoes with certain characteristics of contemporary Chinese society (Sun, 2003), in which no single value system, either traditional Chinese, socialist, or neoliberal, is dominant among the public.

17 From the researcher's interview with Crocodile on 2018, June 27.

Technological Vulgarity

Moreover, the aesthetic and moral denunciations were always intertwined with technological concern, especially referring to the recommendation algorithm that characterised the Kuaishou platform. The use of recommendation algorithms to provide customised content had been the underlying principle of Kuaishou from its launch. Users were assumed to restrict their behaviours to simply scrolling through and watching videos without performing additional actions. This naturalised process was constructed through the combination of the concise user interface, particular strategies in content distribution and the refining algorithm. Kuaishou also established a particular strategy to exclude videos generated by celebrities or top users from being distributed in the recommendation system. The technological affordances of the platform had attracted new Internet users and empowered previously silent groups by augmenting their visibility. However, these affordances also contributed to public denunciations when the social impacts of the algorithm were repeatedly mentioned.

In particular, the unpredictability and intricacy of the recommendation system, as well as the traffic-centric logic used in designing its algorithm, provoked most criticism from the vigilant audience, which blamed Kuaishou alongside *hanmai* culture. For example, Yan strongly opposed Crocodile's expression of the hopelessness of the underclass youths by arguing that:

The frightening thing is its recommendation system. If you see one vulgar video, like a teenage mother, the system will push you much more. But are there so many teenage mothers in real life? The system only cares about the traffic. This can exemplify social problems, but it will also harm the young people, especially teenagers, because they have not got the ability to correctly understand things.¹⁸

In arguing over who should take responsibility for spreading the vulgarity of *hanmai* culture — the algorithm, underclass youths or social structures — the middle-class vigilante audience had not arrived at a consensus. Nonetheless, the middle-class, user-led vigilantism against the vulgarity of *hanmai* culture appropriated its visibility, which might

¹⁸ Yan expressed this in an interview with the researcher on January 17, 2018.

once have empowered the previously silent young underclass. Finally, it succeeded in objectifying *hanmai* videos as a visual resource, triggering more powerful social sectors to surveil and regulate the young underclass. By condemning the vulgarity of *hanmai*, the middle class reinforced their perceived aesthetic and moral superiority compared to the underclass youths, as well as their ability to recognise the risks of new technological affordances.

From User-led Vigilantism to Institutional Surveillance

The user-led vigilantism among middle-class Internet users did not develop into organised action against the underclass youths' *hanmai* culture, though shaming, condemning and humiliating discourses were prevalent in public discussions. However, it triggered the state and the platform, two powerful social institutions, to rethink what kind of representations of underclass youth should be visible in the virtual world. In April 2018, Chinese Central Television, which served not only as a media organisation but also as a branch of state authority, criticised Kuaishou for providing vulgar and harmful information to younger generations. The State Administration of Radio and Television soon required Kuaishou to examine its existing online content and stop uploading new videos, and the app was forcibly removed from the Android app store.¹⁹ Besides these punishments, it was also disclosed that the authorities summoned Kuaishou's administrators for a face-to-face meeting, after which they were required to hire a larger censorship team of at least 3,000 new employees to manually review all the user-generated videos before they were distributed automatically using the algorithm.²⁰

At the same time, a new round of the *Jingwang* [Purifying the Internet] campaign was launched: several state-level institutions collaborated in order to crack down on vulgar and obscene content online. The national *Jingwang* campaign never claimed it was targeting either Kuaishou or

19 The announcement was publicised through the State Administration of Radio's WeChat account on April 4, 2018: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/jnn-uMPL_uPaFbunaE4Kgg

20 The transcript report can still be accessed from the following URL, though the originals were deleted: <https://36kr.com/p/5127645>

the *hanmai* culture;²¹ nevertheless, the state's intervention in the name of protecting juveniles from vulgar online content had significant impacts on Kuaishou. For example, in the end of May, Kuaishou publicised an announcement indicating that they had removed nearly 700,000 video clips and blocked almost 200 accounts every day from early April in the name of combatting vulgarity.²² Under these conditions, *hanmai* videos gradually disappeared from the platform. It was transformed from a genre with tens of thousands of updates every day, to nothing; no one was performing any longer, no videos were being shared, and no more public discussions about it were raised.

On the other hand, Kuaishou actively cooperated with the state to create new sets of algorithms and surveillance rules to purify the online expressions of the young underclass. In the letter of apology posted by Kuaishou, Su Hua, its CEO, claimed that "the algorithm will be optimised with a healthy and positive value" that "strictly complies with the national regulations and common ethics and morals".²³ The changed algorithm not only excluded *hanmai* videos, but also gave more weight to underclass videos with so-called "healthy and positive values", such as the magnificent Chinese farmland or the happily singing rural migrant workers on construction sites. The underclass youths' anger and confusion was erased together with *hanmai*; the ambitions they once articulated were no longer visible, and neither were the formerly enthusiastic public denunciations about the vulgarity of *hanmai*, especially those discourses that interpreted this vulgarity as the result of powerlessness and social inequalities that the underclass youths encountered. Few participants in the online denunciations were willing or able to share their opinions any longer,

21 The *Jingwang* campaign was initiated after the establishment of the Cyberspace Administration of China in 2014, led by Chinese president Xi Jinping, which was to pay special attention to the regulation and management of online information. *Jingwang* campaigns were co-organised by the National Office against Pornographic and Illegal Publications, the Cyberspace Administration of China, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology and the Ministry of Public Security.

22 The announcement was publicised through Kuaishou's WeChat account on May 27, 2018: <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/UzX0vwI01MJ09olu27K4MA>

23 This is taken from the letter of apology that was publicised in the form of banner on Kuaishou in April 2018. There is no available link since it is shared only within Kuaishou app. The researcher kept the snapshot of the letter in her fieldnotes on April 8, 2018.

except to support effective acts of the state. While new technology can be utilised by civil participants, either to improve a previously disadvantaged social group's visibility or provoke public discussions in the form of denunciations, it is also harnessed by the authorities, with cooperation from the platforms themselves, to scrutinise the mediated image of the underclass youths.

Conclusion

By tracing the evolution of *hanmai* culture and related online vigilante practices, this study examined how the use of social media platforms is a significant aspect of the Chinese class-stratifying process. *Hanmai* videos, on the one hand, were utilised to express not only the emerging collective identity of the underclass youths, but also their social visibility in the digital public sphere. However, they also served to reinforce middle-class identity when vigilant middle-class audiences denounced the aesthetic and moral vulgarity of *hanmai*, using technological concerns as a weapon. The technologically mediated visibility of Chinese underclass youths in the form of *hanmai* videos transformed from a force that empowered social recognition to a trigger for various disciplinary forces, both from the middle-class audiences and from state power, in cooperation with social media platforms.

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