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### Repository Citation

Liu, Z. (2021). Illusion vs. disillusion: Chinese viewers' articulation of "House of cards". *Journalism and Media*, 2(2), 115-128. doi: 10.3390/journalmedia2020008

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## Article

# Illusion vs. Disillusion: Chinese Viewers' Articulation of "House of Cards"

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**Abstract:** This study explores how Chinese viewers articulate the meaning of the Netflix series "House of Cards" through analyzing viewer comments posted on Sohu Video, which streamed the show in China. A qualitative textual analysis of the comments reveals that the Sohu viewers turned the commenting of the show into articulations of democracy and China's political conditions. In their articulation, some endorsed American democracy as a superb political system, while others resented it as being dark and corrupt, similar to the one in China. Still other viewers made a connection between "Cards" with China's lack of freedom of speech. These connections were made under certain social conditions, including China's internet providing a space for political discourse, tensions among different social forces and conflicting meaning systems existing in today's China, and Chinese people's increasing consumption of foreign media content and assumptions. Analyzing a particular case of transnational communication, this study demonstrates how the audience can make meaning of a foreign media product by connecting with their own social context, and how such articulations can be plural and multifaceted.

**Keywords:** House of Cards; articulation; online comments; transnational communication



**Citation:** Liu, Zhaoxi (Josie). 2021. Illusion vs. Disillusion: Chinese Viewers' Articulation of "House of Cards". *Journalism and Media* 2: 115–128. <https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia2020008>

Received: 30 November 2020

Accepted: 8 April 2021

Published: 11 April 2021

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## 1. Introduction

Right after the week-long Chinese New Year holiday in February 2013, "House of Cards" (hereafter "Cards"), Netflix's original political thriller about a congressman named Francis Underwood and his pursuit of power in Washington D.C., became a buzzword on China's internet. "Have you watched 'House of Cards'" was asked frequently across various online bulletin board systems (BBS) dedicated to Chinese fans of American TV shows (Zhuge 2013). These early trend adopters mostly watched the show on Netflix using special online access, such as virtual private network (VPN) (Netflix is not officially available in China), or were Chinese students studying abroad, who then posted comments on the internet. Their reaction was strong enough to prompt sohu.com, one of China's major internet portals, to purchase from Sony Pictures Home Entertainment the exclusive right of streaming "Cards" in mainland China (Hu 2013).

After Sohu made the show available to hundreds of millions of internet users, or netizens, in China, more people talked about the show on various social media platforms such as microblog sites. Thousands of viewers also posted comments on the Sohu website where the show is being streamed, which provides rich data to explore how these Chinese viewers make sense of an American political drama. This study examines these comments as a form of articulation.

It is an inquiry worth making because Chinese viewers' reactions to "Cards" make an intriguing case study of audience reception of transnational media products. Particularly in China, a political drama such as "Cards" touches a very sensitive nerve as political change has always been a point of tension and a taboo (e.g., Polumbaum 1990; Yu 2009; Zhao 1998, 2008). It is therefore significant to explore an unconventional channel of political discourse: online commenting of a foreign show. In addition, it is rather unique to use viewers' online comments to explore articulation. Focusing on audiences' reaction to one particular TV

show, this study examines articulation at the micro level, which has received less scholarly attention (Tan 2018).

## 2. Background

Before Sohu streamed “Cards”, China had come a long way in importing foreign TV shows. When China first opened up in the early 1980s, due to lack of foreign currency, China’s television stations had to rely on a barter agreement to import foreign TV programs: commercial air time in exchange for foreign programs (Lull 1991). As China’s economy grew, TV stations could purchase more foreign shows. At the beginning of the 21st century, the internet became a major force in introducing even more foreign media content, both in terms of quantity and variety. Some of this content was pirated, prompting China’s authorities to crack down on unauthorized online video sharing. With individual illegal file sharing outlawed, online platforms with permission to legally import programs became major players in distributing foreign media content in China (Gilardi et al. 2018). Sohu is one of such online platforms.

“Cards” was officially introduced to China by Sohu Video, the online video streaming service provided by sohu.com. Sohu Video was one of the first Chinese streaming services that purchased, rather than pirated, authentic, high-definition TV shows and movies from around the world. Touting itself as THE platform for streaming “high quality” American TV shows in China (Hu 2013), Sohu Video started to exclusively import American TV shows in 2010 and has imported hundreds of American shows since then (Sohu Video 2013). In 2012, Sohu budgeted US\$50 million to purchase American shows, and the amount increased to US\$80 million in 2013 (Hu 2013). Sohu places a fairly large amount of commercials during the shows and people can watch them for free. However, one can only watch these shows through devices with an IP address registered within mainland China. Thanks to Sohu Video, Chinese audiences are able to watch authentic, high-definition, and up-to-date episodes of “Breaking Bad”, “Modern Family”, “The Big Bang Theory”, and even “Saturday Night Live”. None of these shows were imported and shown by television stations in China.

Streaming platforms in China rely on social media discussion and online comments to promote shows and engage viewers (Lin and Liang 2020). Sohu also first noticed “Cards” when the show generated quite some social media buzz during the Chinese New Year holiday in 2013. Right after the holiday, executives at Sohu met to discuss the matter and decided to seize the moment and purchase the exclusive right to stream this drama in China. Within two weeks, on 1 February, the entire first season was uploaded for streaming. Season 2 of the show was made available on Sohu Video on 14 February 2014, the same day the show was available on Netflix (Hu 2013). The first season of “Cards” has been popular among Sohu viewers. It was ranked the streaming service’s number 6 most watched American drama of all time as of 20 May 2015, with more than 129 million total views, according to ranking posted on Sohu Video website ([http://tv.sohu.com/rank/usa\\_tv.shtml](http://tv.sohu.com/rank/usa_tv.shtml) (accessed on 20 May 2015)). Viewers also left thousands of comments on the streaming site.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

This study regards the online comments as a form of articulation. Different scholars have conceptualized articulation (for example, Laclau and Mouffe 1985), and this study mostly relies on Stuart Hall’s version of the concept. Hall states that articulation has two elements: expression and connection, and he stresses the latter (Hall 2007), which is also the main theoretical underpinning of this study.

According to Hall (2007), connection constitutes the process and result of articulation. “An articulation is thus the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions” (p. 141). The connection here has two important characteristics. First, it “has no necessary, intrinsic, transhistorical belongingness” (Hall 2007, p. 142) and therefore is not absolute, determined, or guaranteed. It has multiple pos-

sibilities. Second, the actual connection, or the unity, made very much depends on specific social forces within a specific context, or certain conditions. These two characteristics of connection can be used to explore how the Chinese audience commenting on “Cards” can “turn the text upside-down, to get a meaning which fit their experience” (Hall 2007, p. 143).

Operated within this theoretical framework (see Figure 1), this study has two goals: one, identify the connections made by Sohu viewers as a result of their articulation, and two, explain how such connections are made through contextualizing, that is, exploring the “certain conditions” under which the articulation took place. Ultimately, seeing Sohu viewers’ “responses and interpretations as socially structured and culturally patterned” (Steiner 2016, p. 107), this study strives to reveal how the Chinese audience extract meaning of a foreign show to fit their own experience.

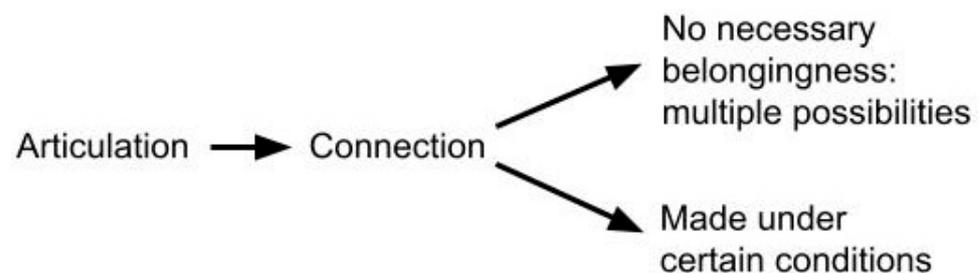


Figure 1. Theoretical framework.

As Michel de Certeau (2006) points out, consumption of a media product can be seen as a secondary production of the same product as the audience, through articulation, can give a different set of meaning to the product than what is intended by the producers. For instance, the meaning of rap was articulated in different ways by different types of press (Fenster 1995). Shift of meaning is also very likely to happen during transnational communication, for the audience tends to assign certain meaning to the foreign media product through connecting with their own social, cultural context, or meaning system. For example, watching Korean dramas allows young Filipino women to express resistance to perceived American cultural imperialism and articulate their discourse regarding poverty, class inequality, and capitalist patriarchal values (Espiritu 2011). African students’ articulation of CCTV Africa’s content shows a mixture of being inspired and weary of China’s rise (Xiang 2018). In the same vein, Chinese viewers of “Cards” have their own way of articulating the meaning of the show, their own way of connecting the show with their own social conditions and experiences.

Articulation is particularly relevant to today’s China because, as Pan (2010) once pointed out, China’s dazzling social and cultural changes can be characterized as the articulation and re-articulation of many simultaneously functioning and yet sometimes contradicting forces. The situation provides a fertile ground for studying how meanings are articulated on just about every topic—be it popular culture, political reform, economic growth, environmental protection, to name just a few—under the current social and cultural circumstances in China. For instance, in the cartoon series, “Year Hare Affairs”, which depicts the modern history of China since 1900 through stories about hares, eagles, bears, etc., the Chinese national identity is articulated through an animal metaphor: China is the hare (Tan 2018).

With such theoretical considerations, this study asks the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What are the connections made by Chinese audience through their articulation of “Cards”?

**RQ2:** What are some of the social conditions under which such articulations occur?

#### 4. Methods

Viewer comments were collected from posted comments on the website that streams the first season of “Cards” (<http://tv.sohu.com/s2013/houseofcards1/> (accessed on 18

March 2014)). The vast majority of these comments are in Chinese and the examples used in the following analysis are translated verbatim from Chinese into English.

The process of sorting through and selecting data was very challenging, mainly due to three factors. One, the sheer amount of the comments. Sohu's comment page displayed a total count of 12,206 comments at the time of data collection. They spread 411 web pages in a reversed chronological order, with the newest comments shown first. New comments were added each day but the researcher ignored comments added after the selection process started. The researcher spent four days browsing through and selecting the comments on March 18, 20, 21, and 24 of 2014. The researcher went through about 100 pages of comments each day, took a break without closing the web browser or turning off the computer, and continued the next day from where the researcher left off, until the very last page was reached.

Two, the random and casual nature of the comments. Many of the comments are not well crafted or well thought-out, but random utterances and casual mumble. A large amount of posts are not about the show at all but just some random phrases that make little sense, as if people were test-posting. For example, one post just says "Fly", and another, "Pretending to look at scenery, haha". Such posts are irrelevant to this study and therefore excluded from the dataset.

Three, the fragmented nature of the comments. People made comments about all kinds of topics, some related to the show, some not. A few hundred posts, for example, complain about the large amount of commercials Sohu placed during each episode as well as the slow internet speed that caused interruptions. Some are personal attacks targeting other commentators. Among comments about the show, some are about the cast, performance, or subtitle translation, etc., which are not the interest of this analysis.

For the purpose of this study, the researcher selected comments that meet all of the following criteria:

- Must be based on the text of "Cards", rather than commenting on elements such as actors or acting or topics not related to the show.
- Must make a connection between the text of the show and the perceived political and social reality in China or the U.S., as the theoretical framework for this analysis stresses articulation as a way of making connections.
- Must express complete points. Fragmented, very short comments such as "Great show" or "Really good" are not included.
- Must express a rather explicit point; vague and unclear comments, such as "Will take a look tomorrow", are not included.

Based on the criteria, a total of 98 comments were selected for the analysis. Screenshots of these comments were taken (see Figure 2). These comments are relevant because they demonstrate how Chinese viewers articulate the meaning of an American political drama through making connections between what they see in the drama and what they think is going on in China and the U.S. Because they are based on the text of the show and express rather complete and clear points, they allow for meaningful analysis of articulation. This dataset is a small portion of the posted comments, but nonetheless rigorously selected and most relevant to the study. Most of these comments are standalone comments, but several are contained within a thread.

德萨德

1 搜狐视频网友 [广东省深圳市网友] A  
美国地方的官员才是真正为民做主，要不然就有下台的危险，看看罗素就知道  
。。

2 林间的枫 [浙江省杭州市网友] B  
那他为什么最后还是背叛了自己的选民？美国的太阳特别圆？

3 开小车的诸葛 [北京市网友] B  
这部剧是我看过最好看的美国人自己玩的高端黑，你居然还能有 美国才是真民主 这样的想法...你这样想让纸牌屋的 剧组情何以堪啊...

4 170176 [北京市网友] C  
你拍个中国纸牌屋看看你能通过吗？

5 红烧肉1982 [江苏省苏州市网友] C  
国立说了，中国铁定不通过审查

6 s791e62601e9 [广东省深圳市网友] A  
3 楼不愧为 帝都的人 确实看不懂民主题材的电视剧；泛泛的说 民主就是各方有博弈的权力和 机会；虽然不一定能赢 但起码 可以参与 也就不会一直输；而政客 就是 博弈的传输载体

12 这种博弈没有一方真正代表人民，党争和利益争夺超越人民，奥巴马想惠民点搞个医疗改革，搞了多少年，民主党全投赞成，共和党全投反对，把党争完全立于人民之上。

2014年3月12日 11:50 B 顶 | 踩 | 回复

**Figure 2.** Screenshot of the Sohu comments. The number “12” means that after counting the seven comments on this screen, the total count of selected comments reaches 12 (each screenshot of selected comments has an accumulated case count); the researcher also marked the theme of each comment: A = Theme #1; B = Theme #2; C = Theme #3.

To keep the researcher’s personal bias to the minimum, the researcher constantly reflected upon whether the data collection and analysis were consistent with the established theoretical framework and criteria. When it was difficult to decide whether a comment met all the criteria, the researcher evaluated the comments over and over before making a decision.

This study employs qualitative textual analysis to analyze viewers’ online comments. Pauly (1991) holds that “the topic of all qualitative research is the making of meaning” (11). Scholars engaging in qualitative textual analysis shall examine at least two things:

meaning, as well as the production or construction of the meaning (Tonkiss 1998). Viewers posting comments on the show's streaming site can be seen as a symbolic practice, through which the viewers try to articulate certain meaning (McKee 2003; Pauly 1991). The process of conducting a qualitative textual analysis is a process of interpreting the meaning (i.e., ideas, values, connections, representations, etc.) expressed through the text (Brennen 2013). For the purpose of this study, the interpretation aims at a better understanding of how the Sohu viewers make sense of a media product from a different culture.

To conduct the textual analysis, the researcher read through the selected comments several times in order to identify recurring patterns of discourse, paying close attention to "persistence of certain themes, phrases, rhetorical tropes" (Pauly 1991, p. 19). In light of Hall's idea that articulation is done through making connections, the researcher also examined associations and comparisons made in the comments (Tonkiss 1998). Instead of using a code book to dissect the selected comments, the researcher read and analyzed the comments in their entirety in order to "bring out the entire range of potential meanings in texts" (Brennen 2013, p. 194).

### 5. Connections Made in the Articulation of "Cards"

A close reading of the comments revealed three recurring themes. These themes were not predetermined or hypothesized, but emerged from the data, in a process similar to the grounded theory approach, where analytical categories emerge from the data (Glasser and Strauss 1967). The three themes and case count for each theme are listed below. There are six comments that do not fall into any of these categories, nor do they constitute another recurring theme, as their arguments are rather fragmented.

1. The American political system (i.e., democracy) is better than the one in China: 30 comments.
2. The American political system is just as bad as, if not worse than, the one in China: 37 comments.
3. A show such as "Cards" is unlikely to be produced in China due to lack of freedom of speech: 25 comments.

Viewed through the lens of articulation, all three themes indicate that these Sohu viewers made connections between the show and American democracy, as well as between the show and China's political conditions. To answer RQ1, what are the connections made by Chinese audience through their articulation of "Cards", the three themes can be further analyzed as various connections (see Table 1). In making these connections, the viewers turned the commenting of the show into their articulation of democracy and politics.

**Table 1.** Connections made in the articulation of "Cards".

Theme	Connection with American Democracy	Connection with China's Politics
The American political system is better than the one in China	complimentary, favorable	discontent, critical
The American political system is just as bad as, if not worse than, the one in China	critical, disillusioned, resentful	critical, defensive
A show such as "Cards" is unlikely to be produced in China due to lack of freedom of speech	complimentary, endorsing	condemning, complaining

#### 5.1. Theme #1 the American Political System Is Better Than the One in China

Many comments express the opinion that "Cards" demonstrates the advantage of a democratic political system.

In these posts, phrases such as “law”, “obey the law”, and “rule of law” appear quite often. One such post reads, *“The show demonstrates that even though the politicians in the U.S. are as deceitful and manipulative as their counterparts in China, they have to consider the interests of the people or dare not harm the public interest too much. They have to abide certain rules and obey the law. They cannot bully the people but have to at least pretend to be humble in front of people.”* Another post states that people such as Francis Underwood do exist in American politics, but his manipulation of power has to be bound within the democratic framework of election and the rule of law. *“Politics is not a bright play to begin with”,* this post reads. *“However, at least their citizens have the right to choose [ . . . ] but here, [people] can only watch them do bad things and can’t do anything about it.”* “Here” refers to China, and by “them”, the commentator means corrupt government officials in China.

Another evidence for the strength of American democracy is less corruption. Several commentators compare the corruption among “Cards” characters and real Chinese government officials and conclude that American politicians are not as corrupt. One post reads *“Really don’t know what is the benefit of being a politician in the U.S. Everyday they are busy to death [ . . . ] They have to solve problems here and run for election there, and then still can’t put the campaign donations into their own pocket. They can’t embezzle, nor can they take bribes, nor do they have their family business take [government] projects and make money [ . . . ] Only one government-provided car with one body guard [ . . . ] Even the mistress ends up being someone who is ugly and disobedient.”* This post largely summarizes the life of Underwood as seen in the show, but every single point listed here has a clear connection to Chinese officials, who are oftentimes seen as not doing any real work, need not run for elections, embezzle public funds, take bribes, assign government projects to companies run by their relatives or close friends, have more than one government-provided car and a group of bodyguards, and usually have young, beautiful women as mistresses. This post is therefore not so much showing pity for American politicians as condemning the corruption of Chinese officials.

The viewers also mentioned some small details in the show to support to their argument regarding corruption. One comment reads, *“in this episode I see that the wife of an American central leadership official was yelled at while jogging in a cemetery, and the next day she even dares not to run into [the cemetery] . . . In our place, we only see officials being powerful and people being weak.”* Some people hail the scene where the White House Chief of Staff has to meet with and persuade the provost of a prestigious university in order for her son to be admitted. One post reacts to this scene, *“If it were in tc, the schools must be competing with each other to have the kid.”* “Tc” stands for “Tian Chao”, the web lingo for “one-party-ruled China”. In responding to this post, another one concurs, *“Top universities in America are private [ . . . ] of course they admit whoever they want. But top universities in China are public and have to consider the interests of all taxpayers. But the reality in China is that people from all around the country pay the money to build nice colleges in Beijing, so that children of officials in Beijing can enjoy. This is the biggest difference between China and US.”*

In addition, some viewers were impressed by the rights and power enjoyed by common American people in “Cards”, which they took as another virtue of democracy. One viewer is amazed by the episode in which the daughter of a voter was killed in a car accident while driving and texting, but the family blamed a water tower that Congressman Underwood has fought to keep, because the car crashed into the water tower. This viewer posted: *“Driving while texting and dead, but blame the structure on the roadside? And even sue the congressman? American people are way too happy.”* A comment responding to this one reads *“Yes. If such a thing happens in Tian Chao, it will be the opposite and the driver will have to pay for the damage to the public property.”* A common rhetorical trope in these comments is the authority–common people relationship, which in recent years has been the center of social tension in China as people are voicing increasing discontent over mistreatment of the powerless by the powerful (Zhao 2008).

Another common comparison made is between “Cards” and “The Legend of Zhenhuan”, a vastly popular Chinese television drama about the life story of Zhenhuan, a fictional concubine of the emperor Yongzheng (1722–1735) of the Qing Dynasty. Many

Chinese viewers, even the mainstream Chinese media, refer to “Cards” as “the White House Version of the Legend of Zhenhuan” (Hu 2013; Zhuge 2013). Similar to “Cards”, the show of “Zhenhuan” is all about wicked, vicious, and dark political struggles. Some Sohu viewers turned such a comparison between two shows into between two political systems. A post says that although both shows depict power struggle among politicians, at least in America, “there is public opinion plus monitoring from the people, and [officials] sometimes need to watch for common folks’ reaction when doing things.” Such comments indicate a disdain of China’s century-old imperial tradition, which still has tremendous impact on China’s politics.

In these comments, the viewers connect “Cards” with American democracy, taking “Cards” as strong evidence for the strength of the American system. Many viewers draw conclusions such as this: “although there are this and that shortcomings of American democratic system, so far, it is the most successful system, in terms of protecting freedom, individual rights, private properties and push for human equality. We have to admit that.” Meanwhile, they connect the show with China’s political reality, either perceived or experienced, stating that American democracy is a better political system than the one-party rule in China. As such, these comments articulate, simultaneously, endorsement of America’s democratic system and condemnation of China’s political system.

#### 5.2. Theme #2 the American Political System Is Just as Bad as, If Not Worse Than, the One in China

The connections made between “Cards” and American democracy are not limited to favorable ones, as many comments indicate that the American political system is not any better than the one in China.

One post says that most of the depictions in “Cards” are trustworthy but the show does not reveal the whole truth. The truth is that “all measures of American politics and diplomacy are established around the core interest and ultimate goal of Freemasonry” and that “the world belongs to the US and the US belongs to Freemasonry.” The author says members of Freemasonry are mostly bankers and financiers, as well as major congressmen. Freemasonry is the leading fraternal organization in the world, according to one of its official websites (The Grand Lodge of Ohio 2020).

This viewer comment might well be conspiracy theory but the commentator seems to believe what he says. It is an illusion that the commentator uses to reveal the disillusion of a perfect America. Other people are just as disillusioned about the ideal image of America. One post reads “The same exchange between money and power, only more hidden, disguised as charity. I have been wondering, why the capitalists are so eager to do charity. Turns out it is for money laundering, otherwise how come there is so much campaign money [ . . . ] Disgusting system.” It is probably referring to the plot where a casino owner donated a lot of money to Democratic candidates as a means of money laundering.

“Although the plots are fabricated, they reflect the essence of American democracy”, reads another post. “Turns out Americans are more corrupt than us.” Yet another post reads “After watching ‘House of Cards’ I know American politicians are just as shameless and disgusting as people from our Party.” The post lists the bad things congressmen do in the show: drug abuse, calling prostitutes, setting people up, hyping certain agenda in the media, power broking, etc. “All the hobbies of people from our Party, they have them all!”

These comments again make connections between “Cards” and American democracy and between “Cards” and China’s political conditions. The articulation here is a resentment, or disillusion, of American democracy, therefore a rather unfavorable connection. However, that does not necessarily indicate a favorable connection with Chinese politics. Some comments seem to defend the Chinese system, but others are simply denouncing the American political system together with that in China. The connections made are rather ambiguous.

These Sohu comments demonstrate that the internet has offered a space for Chinese people to express political views and be part of the participatory culture (Chen 2020). Posting online comments on “Cards” allowed users to respond and interact with each

other and therefore functioned similarly to social media. Commenting on a foreign show became an opportunity to articulate democracy, something that common Chinese will not get a chance to talk about on traditional media outlets. “Internet, especially the interactive social media, has the potential to involve citizens in free and open public discourse in a democratic cyberspace” (Ye et al. 2020, p. 77). This kind of articulation online would not be possible without the internet providing such a space.

### 5.3. Theme #1 vs. Theme #2 Debate

Comments falling under the two themes discussed above form two camps on the website, a pro-America one and an anti-America one, and they debate with each other. Some commentators sing high praise of American democracy as depicted in “Cards”, while others call these people “naïve”. Such debates often appear in the same comment thread.

In one of such threads, a post says that the case of Peter Russo, the disgraced house representative who abuses alcohol and eventually is murdered by Underwood, demonstrates that “*American local officials are truly speaking for the people, otherwise they face the danger of stepping down.*” Another commentator responds to this comment: “*then why he still betrayed his constituency eventually? The sun in America is particularly round?*” A third commentator comments on the second comment by saying that the best thing about “Cards” is that it reveals the darkness at the highest level of American politics and mocks the first commentator: “*How can you still have the idea that America has true democracy?*” A fourth commentator, in turn, derides the third commentator as not understanding democracy, because “*democracy means different forces have the right and chance to play the game [ . . . ] and politicians are agents of such gaming.*” The fourth comment, then, draws the following response: “*[in] such games no one is really representing the people. Partisanship and struggle for interests surpass people.*” This fifth post cites the example of the Affordable Care Act, in which case all Democrats voted “yes”, and all Republicans voted “no”, and concludes, “Partisanship is completely put before people.”

There is more than one such thread of heated debate. In another thread, the first comment points out that some people think America is the best country because “[*you did not live there and only have seen what they want you to see. Once you get in you might regret. There are a lot of problems in China, but the pace of process is really fast. I still feel proud of the motherland!*” The comment responding to the first one reads, “*But in America, no one, even if you have power, can rape the law under bright sun light; no one dares to fool the common people’s intelligence aboveboard.*” A third response says, “*Crows in China and US, the two big countries, are of the same black color.*” The fourth one, responding to the third one, says: “*Still think our crows are darker, to the extent that not a single person can be found among the 1.4 billion people to write about it*”, referring to media censorship. Of course, some commentators might very well contradict others just for the sake of it, simply tucao (complaining and lamenting), a very common online phenomenon in China (Li 2019).

These debates demonstrate that there are multiple possibilities of articulating “Cards”. The connections made by the viewers, as Hall (2007) states, are not absolute and have no necessary belongingness, but are plural and multifaceted.

Such a plurality reflects the clashing values and viewpoints in broader social discourses in China (Lynch 1999; Pan 2010). The Chinese society has seen several trends of thought, including the “old left”, which still upholds the Leninist doctrine, the “reformist-Marxist”, which advocates for more democratic political reform within a broader socialist framework, the “liberal”, which pushes the agenda of adopting Western style liberal democracy, and the “new left”, which proposes an alternative route to modernity with Chinese characteristics and more or less promotes nationalism (Lee 2003). Different social groups adopt certain perspectives as their vantage point of articulation in various social, cultural, and political discourses.

Among the “Cards” commentators, those who use “Cards” to criticize China’s political system are likely admirers of Western liberal democracy. A show such as “Cards” provides yet another chance for them to express desire for democracy and political change. Their

views are close to the “reformist-Marxists” or the “liberals”. Commentators holding the opposing view are more likely supporters of the “new left” or even the “old left”, who refute the myth of the perfect American democracy with a somewhat nationalist sensation.

#### 5.4. Theme #3 Lamenting Lack of Freedom of Speech in China

In connecting “Cards” with China’s political conditions, some viewers specifically focused on censorship and the lack of freedom of speech. They claimed that China cannot possibly produce a show such as “Cards”. Quite a few people were amazed that a show such as “Cards” was even allowed to appear on the internet in the U.S., because they believe a similar show in China, a show that reveals so much darkness of the highest level of government, will most definitely be killed.

*“Try film a China’s ‘House of Cards’ and see if you can pass [government review]”,* says one commentator. *“The mainland absolutely dares not produce a political drama in this manner”,* concurs another. *“The communist party lacks some self-mocking spirit, always trying to constrict your throat to make you sing good of it”,* says one post. Another comment voices the criticism in a more subtle way: *“in some country, just slightly reflecting the dark side will be banned from air. Therefore, what is shown is always how clean powerful people are.”* Of course, by “some country”, this post points at China. Yet another comment says: *“They can use TV shows to criticize themselves. Can our China do it? Look at them having a meeting, they are just having a meeting. Us having a meeting, just like some wooden dolls, without expression, everybody nodding.”* This post compares meeting scenes in “Cards” with Chinese state media coverage of actual government meetings. The two scenarios, one fictional and the other not, are not really comparable. However, the commentator did not care and used the contrast to articulate certain meaning: American media keep it real and Chinese media are just propaganda.

In this line of articulation, the viewers connected “Cards” with China’s lack of freedom of speech in a critical manner. A comparison between “Cards” and Chinese TV shows triggered these Chinese viewers’ lament about China’s lack of freedom of speech. As already discussed in the Background section, China has come a long way in importing foreign media content and has become a key market in distributing international media content (Gilardi et al. 2018). The Chinese audience have consumed a considerable amount of foreign programs through traditional media outlets and the internet. Transnational media products have provided rich material for the Chinese audience to perform the China vs. overseas comparison, which has become a common mode of expression in China (Liu 2017).

It is worth pointing out that China used to have television dramas revealing corruption at rather high government levels. In the mid-1990s and early 2000s, such “anti-corruption drama[s]” (Bai 2014, p. 5) were very popular. However, the Chinese authorities banned the topic of corruption from prime-time television for fear of poor reflection of the ruling party (Bai 2014). The commentators on Sohu did not mention these anti-corruption dramas possibly because they are too young to have watched or remember these dramas from a couple of decades ago. Meanwhile, the commentators were mostly referring to the fact that at the time of their commenting, there were no Chinese dramas revealing the dark side of contemporary national politics to such an extent as “Cards”.

## 6. Contextualizing the Articulation

As shown in the previous section, comments of “Cards” made by these Chinese viewers essentially became their articulation of democracy and politics. The connections made in the articulation, between “Cards” and American democracy and between “Cards” and China’s political system, are made under certain conditions and context. To answer RQ2, what are some of the social conditions under which such articulations occur, the following discussion focuses on some of the conditions and social forces that the researcher considered most relevant to the articulation. It is impossible to include in this one article every single historical condition that is related to the articulation discussed here. It needs to be made clear that the discussion below is not a claim of causal relations, but an attempt

of contextualization. These conditions reflect some unique characteristics of contemporary China, within which context such articulation took place.

The first condition is the widespread use of the internet and social media, which provides space for political discourse. As of June 2020, China had 940 million internet users, and 932 of them were mobile internet users, up from 668 million and 594 million, respectively, just five years before (CNNIC 2015, 2020). With a penetration rate of 67%, the internet has become an indispensable part of more than two thirds of Chinese people's life. While Chinese netizens use the internet for a plethora of purposes, from shopping to searching for information to watching short videos (CNNIC 2020), the internet and social media have fundamentally changed Chinese people's political participation (Tai 2006; Yang 2010; Ye et al. 2020; Zhou 2005).

Through posting comments on the internet, the Sohu viewers were able to articulate their views on democracy and free speech, engaging in discussion of high politics, or "principle political issues of society, the abstract ideas and language of politics" (Cai and Zhou 2019, p. 334), rather than low politics, or matters pertaining to people's daily lives (Cai and Zhou 2019). High politics discussion is more prone to censorship in China (Cai and Zhou 2019), but it is harder to carry out censorship on social media (Ye et al. 2020). Due to the social nature of online comments, which are anonymous, casual, low-profile, and even random, as indicated by the large number of irrelevant comments excluded from this study, online commenting is difficult to patrol and therefore provides a relatively safe corner of the internet for some viewers to discuss high politics. In addition, commenting on a foreign drama depicting political struggle in a faraway land makes it relatively safe for Chinese netizens to openly discuss politics. For similar reasons, China has many TV shows and movies dealing with politics in a historical setting rather than a contemporary setting (Zhu 2008).

The second condition is that today's China is full of contradictions and ambiguities (Lee 1994; Yu 2009; Zhao 1998, 2008), allowing for various ways to make connections between "Cards" and social conditions; multiple possibilities for articulation. The formation of such "praetorianism" (Lynch 1999) is the result of different forces—the past and present, the West and China's own tradition, the authorities and grassroots, the global and local, etc., all competing in shaping, controlling, and defining social discourses, including those on the internet. The "Cards" case further demonstrates the pluralization of China's online discourse. The competing views among the Sohu comments demonstrate these "ordinary netizens' status as consumers who actively (re)interpret, (re)produce, and (re)distribute messages they receive based on their own understandings and judgments" (Han 2018, p. 1980).

The third condition is some viewers' assumption that "Cards" depicts the reality of Washington politics. This study does not intend to generalize that such an assumption is ubiquitous among the Chinese audience when consuming transnational media content. Nonetheless, it is important to not just pay attention to the amount of foreign media consumption, but also to Chinese audiences' assumptions and mentality, which plays a crucial role in rendering the foreign content meaningful, as shown in the case of articulating "Cards".

Many of the commentators, and perhaps many other viewers in China as well, took "Cards" as some sort of textbook for learning about real American politics. Such an assumption is a stark contrast with that of American viewers, who mostly assume that the show is fictional and total fabrication. Katharine Murphy, for example, who was a reporter in Washington D.C. for many years, points out that a lot of the depictions in the show, such as Underwoods' ability to execute his power without mess, are not plausible. "It really is too much—and if you weren't completely addicted and hadn't entirely succumbed to the experience and begged for more, you'd actually laugh" (Murphy 2013). Beau Willimon, an executive producer and writer of the show, said in an interview that the show took an "extreme approach", rather than a realistic approach, in creating the main characters (Ryan 2013). In addition, the show is in many ways inspired by and resembles the British

“House of Cards”, which further undermines its prospect of being a realistic representation of American political experience (Nicolaou 2017).

That “Cards” is fictional and unrealistic is well established in the U.S., but not so much in China. The assumption of “Cards” being realistic is a fundamental part of the articulation process. Most of the Sohu commentators might not have visited the U.S. and have limited knowledge of Washington politics to allow them to distinguish what is real and what is not. They therefore tend to believe what they see on screen, as that is all they have got. This reflects both the ignorance and curiosity of these Chinese viewers, and such ignorance and curiosity are not uncommon in transnational communication. In this process, one can also argue, these Chinese viewers regarded Americans as the Other. “The Other is anyone who is not people like us” (Smith 2011, p. 92), and the perception of the Other is often imagined rather than through real-life encounter (Smith 2011). However, taking into account the eurocentrism often associated with Otherness (e.g., Oikarinen-Jabai 2011; Said 1979; Uçok-Sayrak 2016), the comments upholding American democracy and freedom of speech as the ideal may serve to perpetuate Euro-American hegemony. Future studies can further explore this line of inquiry.

The commentators are anonymous and their identities cannot be verified. However, an executive from Sohu Video once told the Chinese media that his company defines the viewers of “Cards” as people who “possess rich experience and discursive power, with high income” (Hu 2013). If the executive were right, then the commentators were most likely well-educated, middle-class, and urban residents. “Cards” provided these Chinese viewers with a kind of illusion, which they connected with their own experience. In making such connections, the viewers expressed both admiration and disillusion of the American system, as well as discontent about their own system, articulating the meaning of the show in multiple ways.

## 7. Conclusions

Through analyzing a particular case of transnational communication, this study demonstrated that Chinese viewers of “Cards” turned the commenting of “Cards” into articulation of democracy and China’s political conditions. An articulation is “the form of the connection” linking different elements (Hall 2007, p. 141). The connections made by the Sohu viewers and thus their articulations have no necessary belongingness, but are plural and multifaceted. In their articulation, many Chinese viewers made connections between “Cards” and American democracy, either endorsing it as a superb, much better political system or resenting it as a political system just as dark and corrupt as the one in China. Other viewers made a connection between “Cards” and China’s political conditions, including lack of freedom of speech, criticizing corruption, and lamenting that a dicey and revealing show such as “Cards” is all but inconceivable in China.

Such connections, in turn, are made under certain social conditions. In the case of articulation over “Cards”, the widespread use of the internet and social media (online commenting bears some similarities to social media) in China allowed for the opportunity to discuss high politics that is otherwise likely censored and rarely seen in conventional media. The articulation examined here is not monolithic but containing competing views, reflecting the tension among different social forces and conflicting meaning systems existing in today’s China. In addition, as Chinese audiences consume more and more foreign media content, they have certain assumptions. The commentators often assume the depiction in the show, good or bad, as the political reality in the U.S., which is an illusion. However, they use such an illusion to either criticize the Chinese political system, or to point out that the American political system is just as corrupt and therefore be disillusioned about a perfect American democracy.

This study therefore demonstrates that it is a valuable exercise to examine the articulation of a transnational media product by audiences within a particular social context. Such an inquiry reveals that audience articulation of transitional media content is socially structured and culturally patterned. These Chinese audiences made different connections

between the show and the political systems in China and the U.S., and thus extracted meaning of a foreign show to fit their own experience. Meanwhile, there is no guarantee how an audience will articulate a given show or what kind of connections they will make. Audiences in different societies may very well make different connections in their articulation of the same show, all depending on their own experiences and social conditions. That is the theoretical lesson about articulation learned through this analysis.

There are some limitations to the study. More online comments from other sources can be collected. The comments are several years old and current Chinese political environmental might have shifted away from the left vs. right dichotomy. More recent reactions to “Cards” or other political dramas may reflect newer political trends. Future studies can also consider such online comments about foreign entertainment as a distinct realm of online public space and examine more closely its function in China’s political discourse.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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