

PRICE \$8.99

THE NEW YORKER

FEB. 24, 2025



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THE GREAT DIGITAL MIGRATION

Bridging the gap between Americans and Chinese online

BY ANGEL ZHENG



When people think of areas for “cultural exchange,” one would probably not expect a large amount of it to be found inside a small Chinese app called RedNote, also known as Xiaohongshu (“Little Red Book”). Yet, a massive influx of TikTok users migrated to RedNote as a form of protest against the U.S. TikTok ban, leading to a period of friendly communications and unintended discoveries between American and Chinese people.

TikTok is a social media app in which users create and share short videos about various topics including food recipes, memes, and

dance moves. In April 2022, TikTok became the most downloaded app in the world, surpassing even Instagram, the most popular app at the time. However, the app’s parent company, Bytedance, is a technological company based in China, which raises national security concerns within the U.S. government due to fears that Chinese authorities may have access to sensitive American user data.

Relations between the U.S. and China have always been tense given their difference in political and economic systems: democratic capitalism versus authoritarian communism. After the fall of the

Soviet Union, China was not considered a threat as they were underdeveloped. The U.S. tried to spread their ideology in China in an attempt to bring down the communist regime, with many Western media believing that communism in China would lose popularity after they opened their economy to the world in 1978. However, tensions grew in 2010 when China became the second largest world economy, posing a threat to U.S. influence in Asia. Tensions between the two countries were made worse by the American mainstream media. The term “model minority,” which describes a group as having higher socioeconomic status compared to the general population, is often used for Asians immigrants in the U.S. While seemingly positive on the surface, it actually creates a harmful stereotype by implying that other minorities fare worse compared to the “model” group. This portrayal creates resentment amongst many American immigrants, contributing to negative views of Asians in general.

Racial tensions reached an all-time high during the COVID-19 pandemic. The widespread belief that the pandemic originated from China led to a wave of anti-Asian hate crimes in the U.S. A study conducted by the Pew Research Center during this time found that 73% of Americans had an unfavorable view of China in 2020, with those holding very unfavorable views reaching 42%, compared to 23% in 2019. At the time, U.S. President Donald Trump had considered the possibility of banning TikTok as retaliation against the Beijing government. Trump blames China’s alleged mishandling of the coronavirus, saying that “what they’ve done to this country and to the en-

TikTok users break through walls to reach their Chinese comrades.

tire world is disgraceful” (Banjo). These words only serve to fuel the growing resentment amongst Americans, contributing to the negative portrayal of Chinese people and justifying the hate crimes.

All this negativity is not one-sided, however. A survey conducted around the same year sought to find out how the Chinese public viewed the U.S., revealing that 77% of them held unfavorable views, compared to only 17% the previous year. This increase is likely due to the hate crimes as well as Trump’s consistent negative portrayal of China and its people by his use of racial slurs to describe the pandemic, such as the term “China Virus.” However, the pandemic boosted the use of TikTok, contributing to its rising popularity. Rachel Leary, a 23-year-old TikTok creator, states that “having TikTok on your phone is a really easy thing to do to pass time. There’s nothing else to do” (Kale). The app’s addictive algorithm, coupled with boredom from being forced to stay home, makes it the perfect tool for those who want to spend excess time in their day.

TikTok’s widespread popularity raised alarms within the U.S. government, who believed the app to be a national security risk and suggested a ban. TikTok retaliated by persuading their users to “speak up now,” resulting in mass protests and physical uprisings. Others chose to retaliate by downloading an actual Chinese app, an ironic move against the government’s security concerns. Many TikTok influencers

amassed public support, creating a trend that inspired many to join the movement. These self-proclaimed “TikTok refugees” began migrating to the Chinese app RedNote, where they were welcomed by the app’s native users.

RedNote is a social media app that resembles a mix between Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest. While similar to TikTok, it has a stronger focus on visual aesthetics and an integrated e-commerce feature. With the influx of TikTok users on the app, Chinese users began helping their foreign friends navigate the app, with many of them adding English subtitles to their contents. Both Americans and Chinese openly communicated about their daily lives, their countries’ economy, and even helped each other with English/Chinese homework. Some American users are also posting pictures of their Chinese tattoos and having Chinese users translate for them (Dr. Candise). The only requirement for using the Chinese platform (as demanded by Chinese users) was for these refugees to post pictures of their cats, which they happily obliged. The ability to directly contact each other also allowed both groups to receive unfiltered information. A RedNote user, Stacy, shared her experiences on the app’s community. “Just walking through an IKEA in Beijing with a user, it’s fascinating how much things cost there versus here,” she said (“How RedNote”). Some Chinese users were also shocked by the cost of medical care and housing in the U.S., while Americans were fascinated by the cheaper food prices in

China. Preconceptions were transformed as both sides began making discoveries not previously known to them. Despite these interactions, some people speculate that the U.S. may shut down RedNote for the same reasons as TikTok. But that doesn’t seem to be a huge problem for American users on RedNote, at least for now. “The most powerful executives [in America] want to purchase

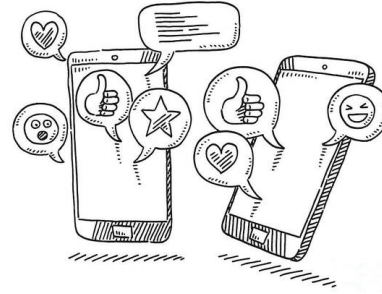


Illustration by Fine Art America

TikTok ... to control what we see and hear, and perhaps to silence some of us,” says Joy, a TikTok refugee. “What’s the difference?”

The TikTok ban brought about the most unlikely sort of cultural exchange, breaking down some of the tension that accumulated over the years between the U.S. and China. Many Americans found rapport with their Chinese “brothers and sisters,” with both sides finding out more about each other through direct contact, rather than filtered information. This shows just how big of a role mass media and politics have in shaping one’s perspective of other countries. Perhaps people have more in common with each other than what was initially thought. ♦

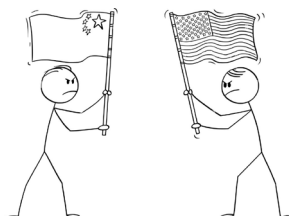


Image by Alamy Stock Vector

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