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CHINA'S SUPER GIRL SHOW: DEMOCRACY AND FEMALE EMPOWERMENT AMONG CHINESE YOUTH



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ABSTRACT

In China, the reality talent television show *Super Girl* not only was an unprecedented hit in television history of the country and an economic miracle in the entertainment industry but also raised ebullient debates on democracy and female empowerment. The purpose of this research was to contribute to studies on reality talent television shows by giving an appraisal of the impact *Super Girl* had on youth's attitudes. Two central questions were raised: To what extent did *Super Girl* enhance or erode democracy experienced by Chinese youth audiences, especially girls? And to what extent did the tomboyish phenomenon in *Super Girl* empower female participants and viewers? This research mainly adopted qualitative methods, particularly case study and focus group. The primary data came from intensive interviews and participant observations in several online forums. The results showed that although *Super Girl* planted democratic seeds in youths' minds, it also generated an illusion of democracy that lured its audiences into a fantasy scope. The tomboy vogue brought about by the show did give young women more choices of expression, but the consequence was gender discrimination rather than equality. Nevertheless, in a male-dominated society with an authoritarian polity, a participatory show like this was definitely a pleasurable experience.

Keywords: Super Girl, reality talent television show, democrataintment, democracy, female empowerment, tomboyism, Chinese youth, fans

FOREWORD

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Overview

Chinese youngsters nowadays are enjoying rich leisure time than their parents did in their youth, with a daily average of 4 hours 46 minutes in workdays and 8 hours 9 minutes in weekends (Cashmore, 2006:194). Among all kinds of entertainment, watching television takes the top position, occupying more than half of youth's free time with an average of 2 hours 39 minutes per day (Xi, 2006:88). For this young and active generation of audiences, reality television, especially talent contest, is one of the most attractive genres of television programs in the early twenty-first century (Cashmore, 2006:194). First appeared in 2004, the reality talent show *Super Girl* did what no other Chinese television shows, not even any other reality television shows (zhenrenxiu), had ever done. It not only became an unprecedented hit in media history of the country, but also created an economic miracle in media industry with revenue around 766 million yuan (95.75 US million) (Duan, 2006:337)

Produced by Hunan Satellite Television, the official name of the show was *Mongolian Cow Sour Yogurt Super Girl Voice Contest (Mengniu suansuanru chaoji nvsheng)*, after its financial sponsor, while commonly referred to simply as "*Super Girl*" (*Chaonv*). *Super Girl* marked the start of the fourth phase of Chinese television entertainment program evolution with the explosion of reality television program in 2004. (The first one was the phase of variety arts in the 1980s, then game-show phase in the 1990s and knowledge contest phase in the early 2000s) (Latham, 2007:67). Over 400 million people watched its finale in 2005, which set a new record in Chinese television history with a number bigger than those of the audiences of the famous annual television show, CCTV New Year's Gala, in the previous years (Latham, 2007:69). The 2005 finale also was covered by over 100 newspapers with series of articles (ibid.). Chinese people were so fascinated by this idol-making contest that the website sina.com alone received 2.4 million comments on the final night (Zhou, 2005). Although viewers and participants of the show were from different age groups, youth group took the major portion and was the most active one (Mei, 2007:113). More interestingly, this Western-inspired talent contest

mobilized around 150,000 females of all ages (from 4 years old to 89 years old) from all over the country, breaking through age and geographical limits (Xiao, 2006:59).

The show was an imitation of the successful *UK Pop Idol* and *American Idol*, two of the earliest and most famous reality television shows of their kind worldwide, which have been copied in more than 40 countries, including Asian nations like China, Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore, etc. On its way from global to local, this Western-inspired cultural product was changed to suit Chinese audiences, though it still shared many similarities with its Western counterparts: judges with strong personalities, telephone calls and SMS voting, specially tailored websites, recording contracts for the top contestants after the competition, etc. The most significant difference between *Super Girl* and *American Idol* or any other Idol-versions of other countries was that the contestants must be females. This special characteristic made *Super Girl* more than just a talent contest, or an interactive television program, in which people could vote for the Idols they liked. It was also a program for girls to actively participate in a male-dominated society, and a competition in which female amateur singers fought to become national Idols. Another remarkable feature of *Super Girl* was the role of on-stage audiences. 31 citizens who represented different provinces and municipalities in mainland China were chosen to serve as “audience judges”, sitting in a row behind the professional judges in front of the stage to help in deciding the results (Epstein, 2005).

Historically speaking, the predecessor and follower of *Super Girl* were both all-male competitions. The first star-making television program produced by Hunan Satellite Television was *Super Boy Voice Contest (Chao ji nan sheng)* in 2003. It soon turned into *Super Girl* in the following years (2004, 2005, 2006), then again was replaced by *Happy Boy (Kuai le nan sheng)* in 2007. In 2008, Hunan Television made an announcement that there would be no more *Happy Boy* because of the terrible earthquake that struck Sichuan province in May, deeming it inappropriate for an entertainment show to take place when people all over the country were mourning for the tens of thousands of victims. Added to that, Chengdu, the main city suffered from this disaster was also one of the main

locations of the show. In 2009, a similar show of this kind named *Happy Girl* was broadcasting on Hunan Satellite Television.

Interesting enough, none of the all-male competitions was even nearly as successful as the all-female show. Especially the 2005 *Super Girl* contest climbed to a peak that was beyond anyone's expectation. It became one of the hottest topics in Chinese people's daily chats and even those who did not set their eyes on this television program at all would know or at least have heard of *Super Girl* (Duan, 2006:333). The 2005 show owed its success to various factors such as the involvement of multiple cities and truly talented contestants, and good media marketing campaigns. Nevertheless, the fact that the male competitions were not as appealing as the female show calls for an explanation from a gendered socialization perspective. A study on "popular culture among Chinese youth" revealed that "females are more interested in popular culture than males: 84% female but just 75% male students believed their friends were involved in idolatry phenomenon; 38.3% of females are worshipping some stars in intense ways though the percentage of males stops at 30.8%" (Yang, 2006:178).

1. 2. Research problem and purpose

Super Girl raised ebullient controversies and debates on the impact of media on youth's perceptions and behaviors. The purpose of this research was to contribute to studies on reality talent television shows by giving an appraisal of the impact *Super Girl* had on youth's attitudes. My research investigated two of the most controversial topics related to *Super Girl* that caught my attention: (1) the political impact of "democrataintment", that is, whether or not entertainment television shows can promote democratic values and practices in Chinese society; (2) female empowerment in regard to the "tomboy" phenomenon in the show, that is, whether or not the pursuit of masculine or boyish appearance can help promote gender equality and improve young women's social status.

Democrataintment refers to the role of entertainment media in promoting political values and behaviors associated with democracy. Although there have been many political dissidents in China, according to many scholars (Hu, 2000; Wang, 2007; Li and Wu,

1999), the majority of Chinese people have not yet been well prepared for democracy. Rising up from the yoke of poverty, Chinese people view democracy as a luxury more than a need. Although the ongoing globalization and modernization are making Chinese citizens ever more aware of individual freedom and human rights besides their longstanding desires for a strong state and economic prosperity, this huge population does not really show much enthusiasm for the introduction of Western-style democracy (Hu, 2000:149,152). Indeed, 90% of Chinese people believe that having democracy is good but if they had to choose between economic growth and social stability on one hand, or political participation and individual rights on the other, the majority prefers the former option, which means they put economy and stability first, democracy later. (Wang, 2007:561). Chinese people are still holding an ambivalent attitude towards democracy: they are not satisfied with the rights they have now, yet they maintain a strong belief that authoritarian regime can bring social stability which will lead to each individual's prosperity. Although Chinese citizens like the idea of democracy, they are far from being ready for a democracy transition (Li and Wu, 1999:165). Under the control of the Chinese Communist Party, media in this country is more a channel for government's propaganda than for advocating democracy. Nevertheless, with the rise of the Internet and online public sphere, Chinese people, especially youth, have enjoyed more freedom of expression and more rights to participate in the civil society of the cyberspace. Therefore, the debate on whether reality television show will enhance or erode democracy should be specifically examined in a Chinese context rather than with a universal perspective. And this research will explore the democracy issue related to *Super Girl* by taking a look at three aspects of freedom of expression: equality, participation, and individuality.

Then, tomboy is a term to describe women who look like men or dress and behave masculine. *Super Girl* was known as filled with tomboyish contestants, especially the outstanding Li Yuchun and Shang Wenjie, two champions of the 2005 and 2006 seasons. Both of them had masculine performances, tomboy looks, used little makeup, and had low and aggressive voices. They sang songs written for guys and dressed in clothes that were not typically girlish. These tomboy contestants in *Super Girl* incurred many

controversies regarding female empowerment and were considered good illustrations of the independent and strong modern women. Owing to this, the show was conceived to have contained one of the basic components of democracy: freedom to express oneself however she wants to be. On this point, democratisation approach believes that fame is personal freedom and success that everyone should have and equally access to regardless of their gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, age, region, etc (Cashmore, 2006:203). The theory of fame and celebrity also explains the fascinating aspect of reality talent television shows: it creates a new group of people who are well-known for ordinariness (Cashmore, 2006:203). *Super Girl* could make dreams of being extraordinary possible for any girl in a society like China dominated by men. And the research will examine whether this can empower Chinese female. United Nations has provided a definition on female empowerment:

Women's empowerment has five components: women's sense of self-worth; their right to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.¹

However, this research will not limit the aspects of female empowerment within the above definition. Instead it will open to explore any possible way to bring power to women.

These above two aspects explain why it is interesting to research *Super Girl*, its stars and its audiences in order to have a better understanding on contemporary Chinese politics, culture and media in terms of democracy and female empowerment through the view of Chinese youth, the new generation and future of this country.

1.3. Hypotheses and research questions

¹ <http://www.un.org/popin/unfpa/taskforce/guide/iatfwemp.gdl.html> access on 30th May 2009

Enlightened by some reality television theorists such as John Hartley, Gray Jonathan, Ouellette Laurie and James Hay, I learned that there were two hypotheses to be tested in my research. The first one was that *Super Girl* played an important role in encouraging the awareness and practices of democracy among Chinese youth. And the second one was that the tomboy phenomenon in the show helped in promoting Chinese female's social status. Based on these two hypotheses, I wanted to find out the answers to the following key questions:

1. *To what extent did Super Girl - a reality talent contest enhance or erode democracy experienced by Chinese television audiences, especially Chinese female youth?*

a. Do Chinese youths think an entertainment program like *Super Girl* will somehow let them enjoy democracy in an authoritarian regime?

b. Did the show provide equal opportunity of sharing the dream of celebrity and fame?

c. Could the show be a benchmark of young people's growing awareness of democracy in contemporary Chinese society?

The previous studies shows us the importance of reality talent television shows to democracy, yet I my findings, which came from diversified opinions of Chinese youth, clarify that there was not a clear correlation between reality talent television contest and democracy in the case of *Super Girl*. The likely result from my research was that democracy and democratainment were still distant Western concepts which had not found a firm ground in Chinese youth's minds. Not only because democracy and democratainment were after all very new ideas, especially in Chinese entertainment industry, but also because of the fundamental conflicts between democracy and capitalism. One of the main differences which make democracy and capitalism incompatible is the beliefs about the proper distribution of power (Street, 2000). While democracy suggests that everyone should equally enjoy power, capitalism believes in the economic role to decide who has more or less power. Therefore, my findings disagree with these scholars about the connection between democracy and entertainment as well as

to prove wrong the power of reality talent TV show in upholding democracy in Chinese context.

2. *To what extent did the tomboy phenomenon in Super Girl empower its female participants and viewers?*

a. Could the process of making a new genre of celebrity through reality-talent television contests like *Super Girl* be considered promoting gender equality in modern Chinese society?

b. How did the Super Girls, especially the success of Li Yuchun (winner of 2005 season) and Shang Wenjie (winner of 2006 season) challenge the traditional concepts and values of female beauty and girlhood in mainland China?

My anticipated results show that on one hand, *Super Girl* brought a chance for Chinese women's resistance, but on the other hand, it reflected the fashionable tomboy trend and had nothing to do with political rebellion. Andrea L. Press's idea (Press, 1990) also has the same idea on the relationship between television image and women's identity. Television in particular and mass media in general heavily influences the way women construct their own image, and gradually grows in women's minds awareness of struggle for equality. However, it is not strong enough to make a change or to bring actual power to women.

1.4 Research design and methods

In order to gain an insightful view of this phenomenon, I mainly adopted qualitative methods, particularly using case study and focus group (Yin, 2003). As Chinese youth were both the main participants and audiences of the show, I tackled this issue with the belief that there are many things we can learn from the voices of people who watched it (Hill, 2005:3) This research took into consideration three seasons of *Super Girl* from 2004-2006, yet focused mainly on the 2005 season when the show gained the highest appeal level. Also, because of the diversified geography in China, I narrowed down the research targets to urban youth only, who compared with youth from the rural areas had much easier access to and were much more strongly influenced by the global cultures and

modern information technologies, such as television, mobile phone and the Internet, hence much more deeply involved in the *Super Girl* Contest.

I conducted my fieldwork in three locations: Hunan province (where Hunan satellite television, the producer of *Super Girl*, was located), and the two biggest cities in China, Beijing and Shanghai, where the wind of modernization and globalization have made its strongest impacts in this country. A friend of mine, who was a loyal fan of *Super Girl*, helped me gain rapport in the field. A professor at Fudan University (Shanghai), who was my fieldwork mentor, introduced me to former teacher and classmates of Shang Wenjie, the first-place winner of *Super Girl* 2006. From there I gained access to many invaluable interviewees, who were deeply involved or closely related to the show.

Except for the subordinate but equally important sources such as the Internet (blogs, online chat rooms, and forums), and reviews from previous works on the same topic, my primary data mainly came from 27 intensive interviews. These interviews were conducted by talking face to face, or through email and instant chatting programs such as Window Live Messenger. There were some drawbacks of on-line interviews however. Without facing the respondents, it was hard sometimes for me to capture their exact meanings just by reading their text-based answers. Especially for email-based interviews in which neither side of the interview was able to give instant feedback. Miscommunication could have happened because of lacking improvisational explanations to questions and answers that were not well understood. Besides possible miscommunication, some of my questions were left blank for maybe the interviewees did not know how to answer or did not want to answer. Also, some intriguing details were not able to be developed further because of long-distance communication.

In both face to face and online interviews, I used open-ended questions in order to get the most out of the interviewees and learned what they actually thought of democracy and tomboyism in regard to *Super Girl*. These questions were non-judgmental and semi-structured in flexible ways to make them feel free and comfortable to respond while also directly or indirectly leading them to sharing their personal stories and experiences of

Super Girl as well as their opinions on the topics I was interested. Some examples of the questions were: “Did you watch *Super Girl* frequently? Did you like or hate it and why? What do you think about tomboys like Li Yuchun? To what extent did you get involved in *Super Girl* (Did you just watch or participate? Did you vote or even join fan group’s activities?) What is your opinion about the equal opportunity *Super Girl* brought to every Chinese girl? Do you believe there are actually optimistic signs of democratic China from *Super Girl*?” And so on. However, there were 4 interviewees got confused and asked me to explain what democracy was. Also, as described in the chart below, half of my respondents (15/27) were fans of *Super Girl*, near three-fourths of them were female, and 22/27 of them earned bachelor degree or higher. All of these things in some extent will affect the outcomes.

Chart 1: Interviewees’ characteristics

Interviewees’ ages			Interviewees’ gender		Interviewees’ connection with Super Girl			Interviewees’ educational level		
Under 18	18-24	Above 24	Male	Female	Fan	Neutral	Never Watched	High school degree or lower	Bachelor degree	Master degree or higher
5	13	9	7	20	15	10	2	5	16	6

Chart 2: Types and locations of interviews

Interview types		Interview location (for face to face only)			
Face to face	Msn chat tool & email	Cafe shop	Beauty salon	Universities and libraries	Private house
21	6	4	1	12	4

5. Disposition

To start with, I will review the basic theories of democratisation and previous works on *Super Girl* that dealt with the role of reality show on democracy and female empowerment. Following the literature review, my data presentation and data analysis will be integrated according to two main themes of my research: *Super Girl* and democratisation first and then *Super Girl* and female empowerment. For the first theme, I will present the pros and cons of *Super Girl* to see whether it enhanced or eroded democracy in China. For the latter one, I will discuss the tomboy phenomenon in *Super Girl* to explore the impact of this show on female empowerment and gender equality. Finally, I will draw a conclusion on reality talent television show and contemporary Chinese youth regarding to these key questions I raised above. And this paper will end with a brief comparison between *Super Girl* and other reality talent television shows in other countries in relation to democracy and female empowerment topics.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Super Girl* and democratisation

As a scholar in media studies, Gray Jonathan (Gray, 2008) explains how entertainment television can be a threat to various areas, including culture, political life and democracy and why it is just as powerful and influential as news program in educating the viewers. He argues that the reason why entertainment program can attract so many of us is that it connects with us emotionally: it can make us laugh and cry, it can change us, surprise us, disappoint or depress us, and it can even motivate us for action and politicization. Escapism and utopianism are the two main qualities of reality television (Gray, 2008:143). Based on the real world, reality television programs especially the ones for youth, construct individual dream worlds and fantasy-lands for audiences to step into that normal days of our lives do not provide.

Therefore, Gray (Gray, 2008:176) stresses the important role of entertainment television in connecting us to the world of politics as it produces more social inclusion and engagement, allows more people to participate as active citizens as well as brings respect

for popular voices. Although the world created by reality show is surreal, but fantasy can supply a virtual rehearsal for political practices, also offer scripts of a better world and tell audiences how they should act to achieve it. To gain a better understanding of this, Annette Hill (Hill, 2005:10) focused her research on debates about reality television and the voices of its audience. On one hand, she analyzes why reality talent show is criticized as cheap, brain-destroying, values-rotting, depression-inducing and having negative effects on modern society, and just junk and trash (Hill, 2005:7). On the other hand, she argues that we should acknowledge the development of this television genre during the past decades. Compared with traditional television genres, reality television show not only serves as public forum but also stresses on self-identity, which is a basic value of democracy. Pop Idol, for instance, is story about individual experiences of being a singer, and that is the brilliance of the show (Hill, 2005:3).

Another crucial aspect of democratainment is the essentiality of audiences' decisions, which are evidences of exercising democracy through voting. On this point, Ouellette Laurie and James Hay (Ouellette and Hay, 2008) argue that democracy in reality television show can be achieved through technology. They suggest that the proliferation of cable channels, satellite TV, remote control, telephone and Internet technology have encouraged viewers' interaction and participation in the show. With an idea similar to what John Hartley (Hartley, 1999:186) calls "Do-It-Yourself Citizenship" which refers to a kind of participatory media culture and self-government, Ouellette and James (Ouellette and Hay, 2008:206) recognize the importance of reality television show in citizenship training and civic education. John Hartley (Hartley, 1999:181) also points out the ability of entertainment to promote democracy. According to his analysis, entertainment television is better than news in offering cross-demographic communications as well as upholding identity and cultural politics, which are pivotal aspects of citizenship besides the aspect of governmental politics. However, on the problem whether reality television show is a "democratainment" program or not, Ouellette and Hay's answer is both yes and no. Yes, because the rules for playing is in respect of equal rights for all competitors. No, because the seemingly democratic rules are set by a small group of people who can decide from which specific neighborhood the contestants are chosen. For instance, in

Super Girl, advantages were given to people from the main cities where *Super Girl* contest was held, such as Changsha, Wuhan and Chengdu.

Most of the works on *Super Girl* published in Chinese have ignored the democracy topic or only deal with it indirectly. Among a few works that touch upon the topic, two books stand out, giving very contradictory opinions of two authors with distinct backgrounds. As the Vice-dean of Radio and Television's Arts School affiliated to Hunan University, Mei Wenhui in her book titled "Happy Reality Show – Decode the solicitation of Reality Phenomenon of *Super Girl*" tries to understand the desire and emotional needs of the Chinese audiences. She deems the core value of *Super Girl* as cultural ordinarization (ping min hua) which gives everyone equal opportunity of participating in an entertainment television program (Mei, 2007:59). Totally opposite to Mei Wenhui's perception about the show, Wei Yi, a young author born in the 1980s uses his sharp-like-knife words to expose the negative affects of *Super Girl*, concentrating on the spell and the invisible hand of the market behind the scene. His book "Bombard the *Super Girl* Contest" ("pao hong chao ji nv sheng") is not an academic work but it is also worth mentioning as it offers us some typical opinions of a large portion of Chinese youth who were annoyed by the show. As reflected in the title, every chapter in this book gives a harsh criticism on an aspect of *Super Girl*. On the topic of democracy, he starts with *Super Girl*'s slogan, "sing if you want to sing" (xiang chang jiu chang), and gives an analysis of the mechanism of the show to criticize the role of money in determining the participation, the outcomes and the aftermath (Wei, 2005:7). For instance: without money, how can you go to big cities such as Chengdu, Guangzhou, Hangzhou, etc to take part in the show? Without money, how can you afford to buy a text message to send your vote? He argues that *Super Girl* is, after all, a profit-oriented competition in which the illusive idea that "everyone can be a star" was wielded to raise heroism, romanticism and idealism among the female participants and audience.

As mentioned above, although with potential contributions to the topic of democracy, most works of Chinese scholars, intentionally or not, fail to give a political examination of reality show like *Super Girl*. Therefore, this research will start from the

democratization theories of reality talent television show of Hartley, Gray, Hill, Laurie and James Hay, and evaluate the influence of *Super Girl* on democracy. Existing works on *Super Girl* so far have not grasped the controversial opinions of Chinese youth about their perceptions of democracy and neither has adequately addressed my questions. This research therefore attempts to make a contribution to the study of talent television show's role in raising youth's awareness about democracy.

2. *Super Girl* and female empowerment

Because of the nature of *Super Girl*, an all-female-participants contest, I choose similar method with Hill (Hill, 2005:11) but my difference from hers is that I explore the voice of audiences from gender perspective, focusing on Chinese girls. Discussed about Chinese female viewers and participants, Mei Wenhui (Mei, 2007:58-60) spends a few of pages in her book to take note a little bit about their tendency toward *zhongxinghua* (unisex or gender neutrality). She argues that *zhongxinghua* is a global and historical trend, which has its roots from the past all over the world and also in China. Depending on individual aesthetics, people can like or dislike a guy who looks like girl or a girl who looks like guy. In her opinions, different kinds of beauty are suitable to different tastes of modern Chinese youth, who are into various subcultures. Neutral beauty in entertainment business has been gaining increasing popularity as more and more people begin to accept and sympathize with this trend. In *Super Girl*, not only Li Yuchun won her championship with a boyish look and masculine sound, many other “chaonv” such as Zhou Bichang, Huang Yali, Shang Wenjie, Liu Liyang, Fu Jing, etc also caught the viewers' attention with their tomboyish appearances.

Mei (Mei, 2007:59-60) further argues that the traditional concept of feminine beauty is no longer dominant, and the success of *Super Girl* icons indicates the prevalence of neutral androgyny in China which is clearing off the burden placed on Chinese women in traditional sex politics. Then she summarizes the debates on some major Chinese youth online forums such as BBS, QQ and suggests that nowadays gender is no longer a critical issue in achieving success and winning audiences' hearts. My expected findings may agree with Mei about the diffusing of gender neutrality in China, although I prefer to call

this women-looking-like-men phenomenon as tomboy trend, rather than a unisex identity like Mei defines. I agree with her that it makes more choices for women as it less strict criteria of beauty than traditional feminine standard and can be a strong push for equality. However I doubt whether it can succeed in putting Chinese women in equal position with men because mimicking men does not guarantee to be treated as men. Hence this research tries to depict a picture about modern Chinese female in contemporary China to see to how much power they can enjoy.

Hui Xiao, a media scholar at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign argues in “Narrating a Happy China through a Crying Game: A Case Study of Post-Mao Reality Shows”, that the extravagant tears shed by competitors and participants generated a kind of ‘melodrama affect’, which contributed to the fantasy of democracy (Xiao, 2006:62). He explains that the appeal of *Super Girl* mainly came from the melodrama narrative and emotional investment. Unlike Hui Xiao’s, my results would not give high possibility to melodrama narrative and extravagant tears as the appeal of *Super Girl*. Instead I expected the newness of Idol-making television genre together with tomboy phenomenon would be the keys to bringing the show into recognition and success. Hui Xiao stresses the importance of the Internet and the online culture “speaking whatever you want” (xiang shuo jiu shuo) in enhancing the “hotness” level of these “inside stories” and spreading the popularity of *Super Girl* and promoting freedom of expression (Xiao, 2006:61). By highlighting that millions of Chinese citizens and intellectuals were talking and comparing things represented on television screens to things that happened in the real world of politics during the *Super Girl* contest (Xiao, 2006:60), Xiao shows his agreement with Gray Jonathan that even a pretending democracy can foster real democracy.

By analyzing the Li Yuchun’s tomboy phenomenon, Hui Xiao comes to the conclusion that the gender criteria has changed in Chinese contemporary society. He says that because of the prevalence of effeminate male characters in Korean soap operas and Japanese animations that are popular among Chinese urban girls, “Li’s androgynous look can be read as a Chinese translation of new masculinity configurations under the impacts

of imported male star images”. (Xiao, 2006: 62). And he is suspicious whether this masculine girl’s image is a product of the program operator and sponsor or not. If Xiao’s idea is valid, it means girls are not desirable on stage and *Super Girl* de-empowers them and lowers women’s social status. To support this argument, Xiao just gives a simple explanation, that female audiences of an all-girl show were much fascinated by a masculine-looking performers than a typical girlish one (Xiao, 2006:62). The boyish appearance of *Super Girl’s* stars, for example Li Yuchun and Shang Wenjie, and the female fans’ desire for these tomboys were important in understanding sexual equality, as it hints of approval of lesbianism. Xiao analyzes the “lesbian photos” incident of the 2005 *Super Girl* first-place winner Li Yuchun (Xiao, 2006:62), and suggests that the “inside stories” of the girl-participants was the core to draw audience’s attention to this show with all kinds of feelings such as happiness, sadness, anger, relief, satisfaction and dissatisfaction. These “inside stories” were fused to catch media coverage and contributed to Idol’s fame. However, I expected my research’s result will add a different explanation to Hui Xiao’s conclusion about Li Yuchun’s “androgynous look” as well as the whole tomboy phenomenon. Instead of interpreting the manly-girl image as imported culture, or homoerotic desire, it is possible that it shows a growth in youth’s strong desire for self-expression, to be whatever they want to be regardless of the conventional way, and that it shows Chinese girls are saying: “We are equal to boys”.

3. SUPER GIRL AND DEMOCRATIZATION

A season of *Super Girl* contest started with the regional competitions held in several cities. The regional champions would advance directly to the national competition while all of the second and third-place regional winners would compete again for the remaining seats. In the national competition, one contestant would be eliminated every week. She, however, was not necessarily the one getting the least national votes in that week. The contestant who got the least votes every week would be asked to pick any other contestants to engage in a ‘PK’² game with her. The two girls would each sing a song, and a special judge group formed by 31 audience members from different provinces

² PK is short for Player Kill, which originated in Kill-or-Be-Killed multiplayer online game. The loser of each match is immediately eliminated from winning the first prize of the television competition.

would vote to decide who would stay. In this section, I am going to weigh the pros and cons to examine the connection between *Super Girl* and democracy in Chinese youth's thoughts and behaviors.

3.1. *Super Girl* enhancing a democratic China

Television has become an inextricable part of our lives. It is where most of our knowledge comes from, and may encourage real political participation leading to active citizenship. I will examine in the following paragraphs how media “hand in hand” with music can offer people the enjoyment of selecting and voting, make them aware of their rights, release their dissatisfactions and fulfill their desires for self-expression in an authoritarian regime, thereby opening a door to the optimistic belief in the state's capacity to develop democracy in China in the future.

3.1.1 *Celebrity and equal opportunity*

To register as a contestant in the show is like buying a lottery ticket which says: you can be a star, if you are lucky enough (Ouellette, 2008:211). This show gave all women the equality that they never had before, that is opportunity to perform in front of the nation regardless of their voice, singing skill and styles of performance. Any Chinese girl, whether she was a student, a migrant worker, or even a farmer, could dream of changing her life forever through participating in the show, however slim the chance was. There was no privilege for the elite or people with “guanxi”³, no threshold to enter the stage, no participatory fee. As long as you were a Chinese female, you could have at least 30 seconds to realize your dream of becoming famous, to have your voice heard and to change your life. And this was 30 seconds of show time just for you. Not only would the winners receive applause and flowers, even the losers could also catch everyone's attention by maybe making a scene of crying or saying goodbye. That equal opportunity regardless of sexuality, appearance and innate attribute, is a very fundamental component of democracy, not so much a prerequisite but a goal to achieve.

³ “Guanxi” is a central concept in Chinese society, describing the basic dynamic in the complex nature of personalized networks of influence and social relationship

Like other reality talent television shows, *Super Girl* changed the conception of accomplishment: being in a nationally broadcasted program is an achievement and maintaining a continuous presence in the competition is an even greater success. (Cashmore, 2006:203). In the highly competitive labor market in China, the chances for young people to succeed are getting more difficult. Yet in *Super Girl*, you did not need to be cute and beautiful to appear on television, which is an equal opportunity to pursue success. Niu, 26 years olds, a female friend of 2006 season winner Shang Wenjie, shared her happiness for Shang's success:

We were college classmates and we shared the same room in dormitory, one in the upper bed and one in the lower bed. There are tons of special moments between us which are still fresh to me. I was along with her through the ups and downs, from losing in the election in 2005 season after Li Yuchun to getting promotion to the champion in 2006 season. I witnessed her smiling and crying during the time she participated in *Super Girl* Contest. Though it is just a lucky game but I know she put all her possible effort for a hope of fame as it means a lot to her as well as to every ordinary girl.

Example of Shang Wenjie told by Niu exemplified the equal opportunity of everyone to be a star because a star is made, not born. And *Super Girl* stressed on the value of hard work and merit rather than innate attributes. Although it was just a singing show that did not require any other skills, contestants, like Shang Wenjie practiced her heart out to win. Pocket karaoke devices and karaoke discs were sold outside the contest hall for competitors to practice their tunes. The feeling of "Oh, it is me on the television" is just so amazing that it can explain why many young participants skipped school to wait in a long registration line (Qing, 2005); or why many teenagers traveled 15 hours by train to give themselves an opportunity to be on the show (Lynch, 2005), though the chance to win was really slim. Growing up in an information age, living in an environment furnished with little traditional culture, and being called "the fifth generation" and "xin ren lei" (new mankind), Chinese youth have strong desire for self-expression. They want to live a different life, show off their personality and do something extraordinary to make them feel special (Yang, 2006:180). And, in this context, the reality talent television show *Super Girl* was designed to address their needs.

More than just an equal opportunity to participate in a public sphere, *Super Girl* gave any girl who loved singing an opportunity to enter a competitive job market through fortune and fame.

Nothing is impossible, even dreams. *Super Girl* gave me and other ordinary girls a chance to try. I was eliminated from the second round, but it does not matter as I got unforgettable experience without losing anything. If there would be another *Super Girl*, I think it is no hurt to give myself a try again to become more professional and gain more public identifying in order to pursuit my singer career in the future.

(Hu, 17 years old, female)

Hu and many participants considered taking part in the show to be like enrolling in a free course and stepping to their dream job. After practicing, presenting their performance and receiving evaluation from judges, they could luckily “graduate”, earn their “Idol certification”, get financial award and public recognition and obtain their dream jobs in the music, entertainment and advertisement industry.

That public recognition sometimes does not need to be as huge as being nationally famous. The “sudden success” in a local level also has it own worth. I have already mentioned above that for someone, being on television itself is a success, although she does not need to win. Any contestant who achieved it got her attention from her family, relatives, peers and teachers.

My parents always think that I am too ugly and can not do anything special. Whenever I sang, they felt annoyed and forced me to shut up. You should know how upset I was. I failed immediately at the first round of *Super Girl*, as you can imagine. But 30 seconds of me on television made my parents change their attitudes. Now I can freely sing any time I want in my house without their interruption.

(Ren, 20 years old, female)

Another example of peer’ approval was Xiao Zhang, who had a close friend named ML in Hunan province that won the third position at the local round. If you could see Xiao Zhang’s facial expression when she was talking about her local *Super Girl*-winner friend,

you could have felt how proud she was to have a friend like that, needless to hear her repetition many times during my interviews that “I am so proud of ML”. Before participating in *Super Girl*, ML just was a ‘nobody’ with bad studying result at school. But after getting the award even just within the provincial contest that was still far from the final national contest, ML’s life became such a miracle that she had never experienced before. Not only she got the attention and adoration from lots of people whom she did not know, but also many people she knew totally changed their attitudes toward her. Especially her teacher, who did not like ML as ML was not the best student in class, then became proud of ML after the reporter of Hunan television came to interviewed about ML.

Similarly, the teacher of Shang Wenjie, first-place winner of *Super Girl* 2006, also expressed his pride:

She was a good student in my class, smart, and has independent opinions. She should be an example for students: never forget teacher even when she is a star. She often sends tickets of her performances to invite me and other teachers, even sent flight tickets for us if her show was in Beijing. I saw *Super Girl* whenever Shang Wenjie was on stage, the way she talked and presented herself was very well-educated (you wenhua). Of course I sent a message to vote for her. All of the students in my class knew about *Super Girl* and most of them watched *Super Girl*.

These above stories of Xiao Zhang and teacher of Shang Wenjie illustrate how being on television show can raise one’s status. And this is a clear sign of individuality which is one of the core values of democracy. At the same time, *Super Girl* made “celebrity” a very reachable dream for every Chinese girl. Even if fame may not choose many contestants, there was one thing that all *Super Girl*’s competitors and viewers can enjoy, it was freedom of expression, which I will argue in the next part.

3.1.2. Role of reality show in increasing freedom of expression

Traditional Chinese values emphasized on collectivism, but this reality talent television show brought every single individual a chance to realize their own worth and to realize their desire for social recognition. Singing can be seen as the rawest form of personal expression (Frith, 1988:11) and *Super Girl* empowered the freedom of choices,

expressions and identities creation, as the logo said: “if you want to sing, sing!” Although the number of finalists was lower than participants, and the number of auditioners was fewer than viewers, there was always an existing hope “It could be me or someone I know” (Jenkin, 2006:71). That was one of the reasons for the show’s success: fulfilling and spicing up Chinese youth’s boring lives.

I really like *Super Girl* because I like pop music, I like to sing and I like to hear many different people sing, or watch all types of girls compete on stage. My life is so boring with the routine of going to school and watching television. So when I received encouragement from my best friend, I registered to enter this competition because I wanted to make a meaningful and different mark for myself instead of spending another day in emptiness.

(Yang, 20 years old, female)

Not only did the participants enjoy freedom of expression, but so did the audiences. Communication technology, particularly the Internet has given a useful hand in developing youth’s democratic engagements and public participations (Kellner, 2007:17). Through thousands of blogs, forums, and chat-rooms, the Internet serves as a channel providing information and a public sphere for individuals not only listening to societal dialogue but also expressing opinions, sharing social empathy (Livingstone, 2007:104). In three popular webpages “sina”, “baidu, and “xialala”, there are thousands of debates on the topic of *Super Girl*. Besides backing *Super Girl* up, there are quite a few Anti-Super Girl campaigns with strong criticisms. For example: “The government should have done something long ago. Death for the Super Girls! Long live the great Chinese national spirit” (Danwei, 2006). Also:

The Super Girls are exactly the kind of trash that China copies from the West to forget about its own values. Hang the Super Girls and hang all artists, who are propagating dangerous Western non-sense and putting the seeds of dangerous values such as freedom in the minds of impressionable and easy-to-manipulate young Chinese people. (Danwei, 2006)

They critics attacked teenagers who spent 600 RMB for voting without spending a second thought on how hard their parents had to work to earn the same amount of money (Ma, 2005). Some kept ambivalent opinions and did not care about *Super Girl* simply because

it was not their interest. “It’s really distasteful to me... But for people like me we don’t have much choice here” (Danwei, 2006). Or “watching *Super Girl* was just for fun, and had nothing to do with ‘public conscience’ or ‘democratic spirit’. It is nonsense!” Whatever opinions they had, apparently, Chinese youth were using their rights of expressing opinions, either to support or to oppose *Super Girl*. It was undoubtedly a significant display of grassroots expression in popular culture, and that has also been the function of music forever, establishing moments of spiritual freedom.

The above *Super Girl* discourse again clarified the role of reality talent television show in contributing to “the growth of civil society or a well-functioning public sphere” (Keane, 2003:182). *Super Girl* does not need to rely on the government’s subsidy to bring enjoyment and happiness to the people. Forget about the role of Chinese media as a mouthpiece of the state. In the show, the media can represent the opinions of millions of people. Zhao (1998:95) draws an official model of traditional broadcasting in which the broadcaster, who represents the government, is at the top and is the instructor; while the audience is at the bottom, and is the passive subject to be guided. Then Zhao argues that this kind of broadcasting model had become rapidly unpopular in the increasing market-oriented economy. Nowadays, the unequal power relationship between the broadcaster and the audience has changed and the traditional model has been replaced by the commercial model. People can watch more shows than in the past and they decide the survival and success of a program (Zhao, 1998:95). It is not only the increasing in individual expression but also the strong influence of ordinary people over the elites on public sphere.

3.1.3. Raising awareness about political democracy

Can the voting procedure in a reality talent television show and the audience’s power of deciding who is eliminated and who can continue to the last step make television viewers aware about the real world of politics? The *Super Girl* Contest, which imitated a democratic system, was commented by many newspaper reporters that it reflected the desire of people for a real political democracy. “I don’t think I can choose my favorite

president in my life time, so I'll choose the girl I like"⁴, said one netizen. In a country where people can not vote for their highest leaders, at least they can vote for their favorite singers (Lynch, 2005), although the word "vote" was avoided and replaced by a phrase "text message of support" (Marquand, 2005). The 2005 champion Li Yuchun is compared to "Mr. Democracy De Xiansheng – a personified neologism for the imported notion of democracy" (Xiao, 2006:60). They consider the contest as the direct election of national celebrity, with viewers as electors, and such a reality show like *Super Girl* as technically part of the political procedure. We can count there were around 3.528.308 million votes⁵ for the first-winner Li Yuchun whereas nobody can measure how many Chinese citizens actually showed their individual support for their President/Party Secretary Hu Jintao. When the name of the 2005 winner Li Yuchun appeared on the official list of Heroes of the Reform and Opening up of China, another controversial debate occurred. Though some considered she had nothing to do with contributions to the country, but many agreed that she changed the thought of the generation, being an icon and a voice of youth (Xiaopeng, 2008).

Like a political election in many democratic countries, the "star election" in *Super Girl* also went through the same phases: primary round, second round and final round. The winners of the show will be the one who received the largest number of votes through text messages. The show gave voice to individuals from the countryside to the cities through their votes. They can freely make their own private choice on a public issue, things that never happened before in China (Marquand, 2005). One may ask how much I believe in the justice behind the ballots and how I know that there was no trick in the show when it came to selecting the winner? Surely there was a high possibility (Cui, 2005). However, no matter who the winner is, some scholars view this voting system in China as a fundamental and potential democratic to sabotage an authoritative political regime (Jeroen, 2007:323). Interviewees shared this view:

⁴ A netizen left his/her words on the forum
http://www.instrument.com.cn/search/BBSArchive_405735_1.htm

⁵ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Super_Girl_\(contest\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Super_Girl_(contest))

I had never imagined I could engage in a national voting before *Super Girl* appeared. Although *Super Girl* was not 100% democracy but in some certain levels, it gave respect to public will. That is not easy and should be praised rather than criticized.

(Li, 23 years old, female)

3.1.4 Fensi (fans) as active citizens

Jenkin categorized television audiences into three types: loyal, zappers and casual. The first group includes people who watch the series faithfully, tape the show to watch again later, think the show best satisfies their interest and talk about the show regularly. For loyal audiences, television show is a popular topic in their daily gossip, not just about the content of the show but also the secrets of its participants. According to Bielby and Harrington (1999), “fans” are people who have strong emotional involvement with the show and participate in a range of activities beyond the act of viewing. Fitting into Jenkin’s definition and Bielby’s description, supporters of *Super Girl*, who were referred to as “fensi” (fans), rarely missed any show and often downloaded the show from the Internet. Xie, one of my informants and her friends discussed *Super Girl* every day, every month whenever they had break time, in school, at home and everywhere.

As long as there were *Super Girl* fan group activities, I participated. From earth to heaven, there was none of them I did not join. Most of my female classmates were fans of *Super Girl*. We watched the show 3 years from the beginning to the end, because it was different from all the television programs at that time.

For her and other Chinese youth, it did not matter if *Super Girl* was a copycat of American Idol or not, it was just new! Some Chinese did not even know there was existed a similar show in the U.S called American Idol. For them, the “new” thing did not need to come from the West and globalization was not necessarily the same as westernization. Xie (female, 22 years old) realized that the show format was “*tuola*” (made longer than it necessarily had to be) and the voting mechanism did not guarantee a totally fair result but she still loved to watch it. Not just passively watching, fensi strongly backed the program up. When I asked Chen (female, 26 years old) why she liked *Super Girl* so much while many considered it a low cultural product, she answered:

The benevolent see benevolence and the wise see wisdom (ren zhe jian ren, zhi zhe jian zhi). People said *Super Girl* was distasteful and repugnant because they could not capture the essence lying behind the show...I feel the important position of being a 'fensi' because I can contribute my share to the success of my Idols.

Normally in social and cultural discourse, the term "fan" has a negative meaning and often sticks with unsympathetic adjectives such as crazy, silly, frenzied, hysteric and losing their minds over idols, etc. A recently study of fan culture by Jeroen and Liesbet (2007) has defended fan against these conventional concepts. They suggest we should view fan as ideal democratic citizens because of their public participations (Jeroen, 2007:323). In another higher level, fan groups have played role of new-style NGOs. During the *Super Girl* marathon process of selection, fans formed into associations and waited in front of Hunan Television station and hotels where *Super Girl* competitors were staying, and they gathered near shopping streets, universities, and schools in Beijing, Changsha, and many more cities carrying posters, slogans and banners to show support for the candidates they liked (Macartney, 2005). An engineering student named Zhao stood for hours at People's University in Beijing to give every passer-by a flier with instructions for cell phone voting (Marquand, 2005).

Thanks to *Super Girl*, fans were in a sudden transition from a powerless to powerful position. If before, they could do nothing but to hope and wish for a little attention from their idols, now they can decide the idols' destiny by voting. *Super Girl* also elevated its audiences and gave them the feeling of their importance in making decisions. Chinese viewers are no longer passive receivers. The rapid growth of market-oriented media industry is creating conditions for its audiences to supervise the government, form a social force, and increase public opinion (Hu, 2008:99). That invisible power of television was illustrated in the Tiananmen incident in 1989. Lull (Lull, 2007:18) said that the imagination that television brought to young audiences played an important role in student uprising for freedom and democracy. And now, *Super Girl* could also be considered as a maneuver for testing citizen's limit and capacity in deciding a most suitable government as well as enlightening the public about "the free flow of ideas

essential to democracy and to social progress” (De Burgh, 2003). Moreover, fans have also been recognized for their important role in localizing the transcultural product like *Pop Idol/American Idol* in the move from global to local. With no “yumi” (the name refers to fans of Li Yuchun), there would be no stardom for Li Yuchun. If there were no fans, there would be no local stars or local culture. That is why local dimension besides cultural and performative dimensions is crucial in fan studies (Jeroen, 2007:323).

So far, I have argued that *Super Girl* to certain extent can enhance democracy in China because it brought equal opportunity to its participants and audiences, it increased freedom of expression, it raised awareness about democracy in the real world of politics and it gave power to its fans who were an active force in the television program. By saying that, I partly agree with Hartley, Gray, Hill, Laurie and James Hay about the role of entertainment media in promoting democracy. However, as I have stated from the beginning of this paper, in the context of an authoritarian country like China, the concept of democratisation needs to be reevaluated. The next section is going to present the counter-evidence and analysis to explain why democratic feature of reality talent television show has not found a firm position in China yet.

3.2. *Super Girl* eroding a democratic China

3.2.1. *Role of money*

In Western countries, SMS voting practice has long been criticized for wasting capital (Jerona, 2007:333). Similarly, the debate in China is about whether *Super Girl* represented the will of the majority or the influence of money. Coming back to the voting issue in *Super Girl*, we easily see a barrier there: no money, no vote; or in other words, it was a vote-buying process which reflected the invisible hand of market! If it is actually democracy, it should be free-of-charge for everyone, equal rights for the rich and the poor (Xu, 2005). How about 1 billion Chinese who don't have mobile phone to decide who is included and who is excluded? Or what do you think if someone paid for every passer-by, for example, say 10 RMB, to vote for the girl he liked? One of my interviewees, who was a die-hard fan of *Super Girl*, revealed a set of "professional tricks" to make her favorite candidate win:

I wanted Li win but I knew my vote for her was not enough. Then I often took my friends' and relative's phones to vote. Sometimes if I was busy or afraid that I would forget, I would send money to an association – a higher level of fan group. Every famous and well-received participant had her own organization in many big cities: for example Zhang Meina official website, Li Yuchun official website, etc. Through some online agency you can send thousands of RMB to a specific bank account to "donate" for the success of the one you like. I often sent 200 RMB, but some of my richer friend sent 1000 RMB. If you could not find the instructions for collecting money to send SMS votes in these webpages, that was because it was disguised under the announcement of “fund-raising for charity with our Idols.”

Amazingly, the procedures of these organizations were really professional. Their webpage has instruction for you to vote by yourself and instruction for donating money to support your idol through online money-transferring service to their bank account. Depending on your financial ability and your love for this competitor, the money you donate toward sending SMS votes can vary from 1 yuan to thousands of yuan. Then these organizations would use the donated money to buy lots of phone numbers because the voting rule allowed only one message from each phone number. There were many rumors that Li Yuchun won in the SMS battle because her fan group bought trucks of SIM (phone) cards or a rich businessman sent 50,000 text messages to vote for Zhou Bichang – the second-place winner (Xiao, 2006:62). So, through this kind of organization, actually everyone can vote numerous times instead of once. This system suggests that the most important thing is winning, no matter what tricks you made, regardless of whether it is a fair win or fund-raising win. Therefore to become an Idol, one should be the best at gaining SMS votes rather than singing ability. From the profit-making perspective of television producers, the winner is interchangeable. It does not matter who wins as long as the show has good ratings and attracts sponsors and advertisers, including phone companies and banks that profited from the SMS voting activities. (Coutas, 2006:374,378). Voting itself can not be sufficient for the legitimate democracy if the outcome is influenced by capital as it gives power to the ones who has money rather than equally distribute power to everyone.

At the aftermath of *Super Girl*, still there has not been any sign of threats to the Chinese authoritarian regime yet. Some politicians raised criticisms about the show. For instance, Liu Zhongde, member of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, said that watching a show was like opening door to get fresh air but flies and mosquito also came in, and youth were contaminated in the midst of laughter and entertainment by a low culture product, by spiritual pollution and by reduction of aesthetic sensibility (Danwei, 2005). However, this was more like a personal opinion in the anti-*Super Girl* discourse than an official reaction from the government. If *Super Girl* with quasi-democratic format could actually threaten the authoritarian regime, all reality talent television show would be banned, because the media in this country is still under the control of the China Communist Party. In contrast, what we observed is the emergence of *Happy Boy* right after the last season of *Super Girl*, and now Hunan Satellite Television is preparing for a new show, *Happy Girl*, the proposal of which was approved by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television in April 2009⁶. Being able to handle the balance between two forces-market and authoritarian regime-this kind of talent show not just survives, but will grow as long as China keeps the market trend in media industry (Latham, 2007:68).

2.2. Democratic fantasy

The direct voting procedure of the contest ended up in an unexpected result, selecting a champion Li Yuchun who had a worse voice than other contestants (Zhou, 2005). What concerns me here is that a democratic choice sometimes doesn't mean a 'right' choice. Li Yuchun got the majority's support by her impression more than her ability. An unqualified president maybe is chosen just by emotional votes. Well, it would be interesting also to know the geographic and ethnic breakdown of the voters. Although this was a national contest, most the voters were in urban areas. Some remote region or some minority groups could not access to the television to know who to vote for nor afford technology to actually vote. This pointed to the weakness of what claimed to be

⁶ Landreth, Jonathan, China begins "Happy Girls" quest: Talent shows get regulatory nod after four-year absence
http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/content_display/asia/china/e3i99f8bcdd4e59da834c3a6a237950de2c

democracy here: it did not equally distribute the rights to different groups either to protect or even to give a voice equally to everyone. Cosmopolitan youth would have priority and better choices to access the show and to vote than would young people in rural areas. Then, let's face it again: how much power did the audiences of *Super Girl* actually have when the voting practice was under control of the show's producer and the freedom of choice was limited? For instance, in *Super Girl* 2006, to restrict the number of applications, the age of the contestant had to be 18 or above, instead of any ages like in the year 2005. The producer could also choose which cities were the main places of *Super Girl*, that gave advantages to contestants in these areas.

I am not that stupid to believe *Super Girl* taught me democracy. It was not even telling its audiences real stuff. Everything was under control of the show's producer. He manipulated the whole program and presented the parts which he thought could raise our emotion and attract our attention. Plus there was nothing absolutely fair in *Super Girl*. How many girls actually can change their lives thanks to *Super Girl* except for one or two super SMS-mobilizing contestants?

(Ma, 25 years old, female)

2.3. Pretend democracy

Are we so naïve to believe that parading on the street with some banners for the girls you like is democracy? Millions of people participated in an entertainment program, but is it the implication that every Chinese people are ready for democracy in real political context? Do Chinese people want or care about democracy? There are different notions of democracy among Chinese people. Workers in northeast China even put up the sign "we don't want democracy, we want food." (Zhao, 2005:64) When was asked whether *Super Girl* can grow democracy, Ming (23 years old, male) answered:

I did not like Zhang, so I voted for Li. It was fun when watching lots of girls. Some were pretty, some were silly. Who cares if it was democracy or not?"

22 of 27 my interviews shared the same opinions with Ming, that democracy in an entertainment television show was just some exaggerated idea coming from the West but not really suiting Chinese situation:

Democracy? From *Super Girl*? Are you kidding me? I have never thought of it. It was just a long, repetitive entertainment show. I still remember those days whenever I turned on the television and oh my goodness, *Super Girl* again. If democracy were as simple as participating in a TV program, we would have democracy long ago. *Super Girl* represented public will or public opinions about the favorite girl, that could be! But democracy, no!”

(Zhou, 22 years old, male)

It was just a mindless entertainment without touching any serious content, propaganda and ideology like other TV shows in China always do. It made me laugh and was a good topic for me chatting with friends. People around me and I did not take *Super Girl* seriously. We did not care much about the democracy debate on the Internet or what had been posted on the media as it was just a waste of time and did not help in my life or my career.

(Zhao, 25 years old, female)

Looking at *Super Girl* from the view of show-making members (producer, director, host, editor, judges...), Li Li of Hunan Satellite Television said that *Super Girl* made a grand party for all the participants, who were ordinary people, to sing and experience the charms of television and from the very beginning they did not have any intention to do with democracy (Qing, 2005). A quasi-democracy show is no more than a game and it does not mean democracy in every social and political instance. Entertainment media, especially in the case of a reality talent television show *Super Girl*, can show Chinese people new ways to be, think, look and feel, and sow seeds of democracy in people's mind, or at least give them with entertainment and cultural democracy. But entertainment media alone can not provide a democratic political system in which people can decide their own government. Some would argue that the consumer fantasy of democracy, as in this TV show, is a substitute or palliate for real democracy, in other words, it lulled people into thinking they have freedom although in reality they did not. The process of choosing the Idol mimicked a democratic process, although ultimately the producers of the show can probably decide the outcome and corruption can alter the result. So, there is

both an optimistic and pessimistic view of these reality talent television shows in the role of building a democracy in China, but I would agree with Jenkins that “a participatory entertainment media culture is worth fighting for” (Jenkins, 2006:248).

4. SUPER GIRL, SEXUALITY AND FEMALE EMPOWERMENT

4.1. Tomboyism and the revival of a Chinese sexual tradition

Li Yuchun, the most famous ‘tomboy’ in *Super Girl*, was totally the opposite of what almost all female Chinese pop singers were like. She was 1.74 meters tall; kept short hair; wore pants and T-shirts, and no makeup; sang songs written for male singers such as “In my heart there’s only you, never her” and sang in a bass voice, danced in a Ricky Martin style. Li Yuchun’s appearance and characteristics not only caught the public’s attention but also helped her defeat other contestants in *Super Girl*’s national championship. Li Yuchun’s stardom led to a huge dispute on the tomboy trend and sexuality, because it challenged the conventional Chinese criteria for feminine aesthetics and traditional gender norms among Chinese youths. The Li Yuchun tomboy phenomenon fits the explanation of Gill (Gill, 2007:257) about the sexualization of popular culture on two aspects: 1) focusing on women’s body as main site to analyze femininity and 2) extraordinarily proliferation of discourse about female presentation.



Picture 1 and 2: Tomboy Li Yuchun



Picture 3: Li Yuchun and YaoMing, a famous Chinese basketball player

24/27 of my interviewees do not have prejudice about tomboys, as for them everyone has her own style and it is not relevant to liking her or not. Asking fans of Li Yuchun why they liked her, I received various answers, such as: “she has an unorthodox but charming style” (Yu, 23 years old, female), “I love her aggressive singing” (Liu, 21 years old, female), “I think she is brave as she dares to be a manly girl” (Sun, 18 years old, female), “I don’t know...Love is love, do I need a reason? Maybe because she is true to herself: simple, natural, and not pretentious” (Xie, 22 years old, female). However, all her fans I interviewed happened to be female. None of my male respondents said that they liked Li Yuchun or would have feeling for this type of girls.

For many businesses, in the age of commercializing Chinese media, *Super Girl* was a rich land to invest in merchandising activities of the stars, advertisements for the show and especially for the mobile phone company, with 1 yuan per voting message, plus sponsor and advertisements. This was indeed a money-making program (Macartney, 2005). At the time of Li Yuchun’s success, the pop music industry transformed her into a means of marketing products (Firth, 1990:29). With her valuable, millions-of-yuan body image, Li Yuchun became a busy commercial star for many products, including some global famous brands such as Swatch, Coca-Cola, Hewlett Packard, etc (Xiao, 2006:65). Her

frequent appearances in many advertisement spots at the aftermath of *Super Girl* have been perceived as a public encouragement of tomboy or any Chinese girls who wanted to change her look (Mei, 2007:59). Li Yuchun's motto: "Be yourself there is no pressure" (zuo wo zi ji jiu bu hui you ya li) was understood to mean there is no right or wrong path to present your individual appearance. Even a handsome girl or a pretty guy is acceptable. Her motto has been widely quoted to encourage people who hesitate or dare not to present their true self just because they are different from others. Li's uniqueness, not being the typical beauty, assures her successful social positions and career achievements. The tomboy phenomenon places emphasis on the right to be different and that is what I call "free self-expression of individuality" that is a democratic value.



Picture 4: Two contestants of Super Girl:

Li Yuchun with tomboyish style and Zhang Liangying with traditional girlish style

Again, the Li Yuchun case confirms the theory about television and television star's effects: television programs can become a strong force to change ideology, lifestyle and cultural concepts (Lull, 2007:18). In an analysis of *Malaysian Idol*, a show similar to *Super Girl*, Lim (Lim, 2008:70, 74) argued that new values created by television programs, which are best represented by a television celebrity, would sooner or later get into our daily lives and become family values and social values. The reality talent show

winner then is reckoned as a role model, a perfect example of success and a reflection of audiences' desire for opening their minds toward alternate sexuality (Firth, 1990:29). Her tomboyish appearance brought many scandals about Li Yuchun's sexuality, one of which was the "lesbian photos" incident. Several days right before her performance in the final round of Super Girl, Li Yuchun lost her cell phone. Then a day or two after that, some pictures of tomboyish Li Yuchun hugging other girls were spread online and in the newspapers. No matter how Li Yuchun defended that she was straight, lesbian-related topics seemed to blossom around her.

When China opened its door to global trade and the international market, especially after joining the WTO, the wind of Western culture blew in Mc Donald, NBA, Coca-Cola, Hollywood, and the West's sexual ideology and openness (Rosen, 2003:104-109 and Jeffreys, 2006:5) However, we should not forget that opening up about sex and "yang-yang" (homosexual) love actually has been well-recognized in China's long and colorful history. Chinese art like poems, portraits, paintings, and novels portrayed many cases in which emperors had their male concubines or bisexual relationships. Over 2000 sexual-related items, some dated back thousand of years, have been displayed in the Chinese Museum of Sex Culture in Shanghai since 1993. Liu Dalin, the founder of this museum, as well as sociology journal editor at Shanghai University said that: "Chinese attitudes [about sex] are influenced by tradition, [and] there are many things we can learn from our ancestors. The purpose of this museum is to clear away the mystery and prejudice surrounding sex in China today" (Mooney, 2006:447). Confucianism and Taosim, two main religions in China never referred to "tongzhi/tongxinglian" (homosexuals/homosexual relationships) as a sin, while Christianity does, so who is more opened about sex? Sex became a sensitive and dirty word and the homosexuals were ill-treated during the time of Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. Therefore, the opening to the West's sexual ideology recently, in particular the Li Yuchun tomboy phenomenon needs to be viewed as the revival of a Chinese traditional concept of sexuality than something adopted from the West.

4.2. How empowering is the tomboy?

China's reform policy plus social economic development in these recent years have given more public spaces for women to work outside their houses and to participate in the public sphere. In this post-feminism period, women have been receiving equal compensation for equal work with men, have been improving social and economic conditions for themselves and in many cases women even have been replacing men in seizing the breadwinner status (Press, 1990:4). They also free themselves from "the strictures of confining sexual and social identities" (Press, 1990:4) Gaining more freedom in regard to identity and self-expression, women's attitude to beauty is also getting more flexible and open minded, and women's options and choices of their styles are increasing (Travis, 242). Chinese women nowadays can dress in whatever they want without fear of degrading women's qualities. She has a right to choose what she wants to look like and what she wants to be, rather than obeying the majority (Berru, 2008:12). Women are now living in a broad-minded society in which sex does not determine one's right, class or status, which makes women realize that they want to be equal to men and somehow imitate men from appearance to behavior. (Mansfield, 2006:3)

Why can men be sissy but women are not allowed to be boyish? Beautiful girls are so common, you can find them anywhere. We are now looking for something special and less boring. I think that's why Li's style became popular."

(Zheng, 25 years old, female)

Li Yuchun's fans agreed that her singing ability was even much worse than other competitors. So what were the reasons for their adoration? Most of my interviewees said because "She is unusual", and young people, who always seek "the new", find "the unusual" fascinating. Explosive, aggressive, not tender, out-going, young women with short hair are very different from a traditional image. Their unusual looks express their generational independence from parents.

I have never thought Li Yuchun case is a phenomenon. Lots of girls have the hair cut like her. Why didn't we mention about them but only about Li?

I think our society nowadays becomes more understanding and tolerant with the tomboy.

(Luo, 23 years old, male)

The standard of beauty always changes depending on the social, economic and political context (Travis, 243) In order to let that trend appears and spreads in a certain environment, media becomes a efficient tool, especially reality television which has long been considered as having great impacts on cultural construction of gender and sexuality (Brown, p.81). But when it becomes common and widespread, it loses its appeal, which explains the decreasing of *Super Girl* viewership in 2006, the season after *Super Girl* reached its climax with Li Yuchun's 2005 win). Even many faithful fans of the show did not want to watch it any more as they thought it had lost its "creativity" and the competitors lacked "character". Although Shang Wenjie, the champion of 2006 season, also has the tomboy appearance and presentation, she did not get as much attention as Li Yuchun got the year before. Instead, Shang Wenjie was evaluated as common, lack of newness, or even as an imitation of Li Yuchun. Moreover, one of the strongest criticisms about the *Super Girl* tomboy phenomenon was based on biological aspect. Hence, the *Super Girl* tomboy phenomenon should be treated as a fashionable trend rather than a rebellion to traditional aesthetics.



Picture 5 and 6: Chinese netizens made jokes of Li Yuchun

Many scholars, whose researches about the emphasis on women's appearance until now, have agreed that beauty is a socially constructed norm shaped by its environment (Travis, 237). In *Super Girl*, another reason why female audiences of the all-girl show found a boyish image more outstanding than a typical feminine pop star image, was because the Chinese one child policy supplied an influential social condition for upholding the tomboy female characteristic. Being born as a girl in a society of son-preference, many daughters carried their parents' disappointment of not having a son. Some fathers and mothers were afraid their only girl would be weak and coddled, some hoped their only daughter become a "dragon" (wang nv cheng long), which is originally from "wang zi cheng long" (hope their son become a "dragon"). Therefore, on purpose or not, because of the family's desire as well as economic and social pressure, a new generation of young women is changing themselves to be as strong, manly and independent as guys" (Mei, 2007:59).

But many people, especially young men, did not like this change. One of the strongest criticisms about the *Super Girl* tomboy phenomenon was based on biology.

Males and females are born with different characteristics. So if women think of liberating themselves and gaining equality by making them look like man, I think they are going on a wrong path.

(Zhong, 26 years old, male)

I do not feel seduced by that type of girl, and never think of she or someone like her could be my girlfriend. I think an ideally beautiful and attractive girl must have their girlish body, especially on their breast, waist and hip, which Li Yuchun fails to possess.

(Wei, 25 years old, male)

When Li Yuchun was put at the second place (according to a survey conducted by *beijingnews*) in the list "top 50 most beautiful Chinese stars" just after Gong Li⁷, "Do you

⁷ <http://english.cri.cn/3086/2006/05/24/44@94182.htm>

think Li Yuchun is beautiful?” became a hot topic in *China Daily*'s online community⁸, and not just only this webpage. Some made fun of Li's sexuality: “I don't know whether I should call Li a he or a she”, some got shocked: “Li is the second most beautiful Chinese woman, that must be news in April Fool Day”. Many Chinese youths, who are not supporting her style, when mentioning Li Yuchun, instead of saying “pretty, tender”, they described her as “handsome, cool” and widely called her with nickname Chun brother (Chun ge), or “female-Yao Ming” (a famous Chinese basketball player whom Li Yuchun's face look like).

In picture 5, a Chinese netizen who did not like the fact that a girl looked like a guy, used Photoshop software to make a joke about Li Yuchun. The sentence written on her left means: “Li Yuchun is the representative of one-child policy”, associated with the official slogan of the one-child policy written on her right “Having a son or a daughter is all the same” (sheng nan sheng nv dou yi yang). Picture 6 illustrates the idea that everything can change, even a girl can change to be a fake boy just like a true Adidas product can become a fake Adivon. Therefore, more women mimicking men should be viewed as the reinforcement of the cultural belief in the superiority of boys and masculinity rather than the empowerment of young women. In other words, it was a sign of more gender discrimination than gender equality: women realized the best and only way to succeed was to behave like male. The individual girls and fans are empowered to have Li as a role model for “being yourself” and not caring about appearance, but it does not change the power of Chinese society to marginalize tomboys. To summarize, because of a more open-minded society, women can decide what they look like but it is still a long way to go to fully equal with men.

5. CONCLUSION

The results of this research showed that although the entertainment show named *Super Girl* planted democratic seeds in youths' minds, it also generated a democratic illusion that lured its audiences into a fantasy and did not have much influence on raising social and political awareness. That limitation comes from many elements such as the nature of

⁸ <http://bbs.chinadaily.com.cn/viewthread.php?gid=3&tid=516653&extra=&page=1>

entertainment shows, market-oriented essence and fraud, and the transitional age when no belief is dominant. Practical thinking and doubt make Chinese youth view democracy as something unrealistic and hard to achieve in an authoritarian regime. From what I already stated above, the polyphony of contestants and audiences also reflect other characteristics of popular culture among Chinese youths, which best described in a study of Yang about Chinese youth in transition, which are best described by Yang (2006:174). Consumerism (instead of political ideology) + Idol worship + Internet and mobile phone use + influences from outside mainland China + industrialization of popular culture and its interaction with other industries, these main features of Chinese youth culture all can be found in *Super Girl*. At the same time, we should understand that the anti-*Super Girl* fandom tells us something about what young audiences want. Such campaigns and anti-*Super Girl* fandom posited a demand by picky and smart Chinese young viewers for fresh and quality entertainment program.

The tomboy vogue brought about by *Super Girl* did give young women more choices of self-expression. *Super Girl* increased female active participation in a social trend, and made a new image of strong young Chinese women visible to the public. The Super Girls, especially the success of Li Yuchun (champion of 2005 season) challenged the traditional concepts and values of female beauty and girlhood in mainland China proving that a girl does not need to be tender, elegant and graceful to be successful. However, the consequence of this tomboyish phenomenon brought gender discrimination rather than equality as it again confirmed the preferences and dominance of men in Chinese society.

Because they are less expensive to produce but well-received by large audiences, reality talent television shows are more and more popular. With the rapid growth both in quality and quantity of reality television all around the world, the question about democratisation will be raised again and again. In other countries, another crucial factor which affects the democratic feature of a reality television show is technology. Intentionally or not, technology can thwart democracy in a reality show by changing the voting outcomes, sometimes an alteration as small as less than 1% of the total votes is enough to make a difference as huge as a national championship. A report on *American Idol* revealed an

estimation of tens of thousands of votes lost because of technology problems such as: traffic jam on the telephone line and potential hackers who just need several seconds to alter the voting number to whatever they want or to tie up the phone lines so that other people can not place their votes (Seibel, 2004:1). It means that no matter how many people vote, only a limited number can have their votes counted, and yours may be not included. A study on Indonesia Idol points out another reason why there is not enough correlation between reality talent television shows and democracy: the 'democratic' voting process is practiced only by loyal fans, not by regular viewers. In other words, it was democracy for fans who were interested in voting or who wanted to contribute their votes for the success of their Idols, rather than a democracy for all of the show's viewers.

Unless all the illusion and drawbacks mentioned above are solved, the role of reality talent television show in China is not strong enough to either increasing democracy in youth's awareness or bringing female empowerment. However, on a long way to achieve this goal, a reality talent television show like *Super Girl* needs to be appreciated as a social playground where each different individual, even a tomboy, was respected.

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