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## Androgynous Beauty, Virtual Sisterhood

*Stardom, Fandom, and Chinese Talent Shows  
under Globalization*

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In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes.

—Andy Warhol, exhibition catalog (1968)

[P]opular culture always has its base in the experiences, the pleasures, the memories, the traditions of the people. . . . Hence, it links with what Mikhail Bakhtin calls “the vulgar”—the popular, the informal, the underside, the grotesque.

—Stuart Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” (1993)

Three decades of post-1978 rapid economic growth have made China the world’s second-largest economy. Its 2002 integration into the World Trade Organization further affirmed its place in the global capitalist order. The accelerating marketization and globalization of the Chinese economy have changed every aspect of contemporary Chinese society, including its gender ideology and cultural politics. Transnational capital and cultural flows have brought in a variety of imported television programs broadcasting to the single largest national audience in the world. The threat of foreign cultural invasion has propelled a reform of the Chinese television broadcasting system that, combined with an emerging Internet culture and regionalization of visual culture, affects its youthful audience’s perceptions of beauty, gender, and sexuality.

In the recent frenzied competition among Chinese television stations in adapting various Euro-American reality shows into localized programs, an arguably first made-in-China idol has been produced. The craze for the androgynous beauty of this unlikely new star has spread from mainland China to Taiwan, Hong Kong, and overseas Chinese communities mainly

through the medium of the Internet. This new phenomenon of urban youth culture suggests not only dramatic changes in the definition of femininity in a globalizing China but also the enormous power of the new medium.

In this chapter I will examine how transnational popular imagination and visual pleasure transmute ephemeral televisual signals into universal moral and aesthetic legibility in an age of globalization. I will start with a survey of dramatic changes in China's television program production and consumption with a focus on the sweeping popularity of the talent show *Super Girl* (*Chaoji nüsheng*) and its winner Li Yuchun, a tomboyish girl with a deep voice and mediocre singing skills. Then I will investigate how the urban-based younger generation within or without the national boundaries of mainland China negotiate their cultural, ethnic, and gender identities through watching the reality show, becoming its fans, engaging in heated debates about it, supporting and imitating the young star, and forming online virtual communities and sisterhood. Tracing a transnational flow of iconoclastic images of androgynous beauty, I also analyze how a melodramatic structure of feeling of the talent show attaches emotional appeal and moral legitimacy to this "revolutionary" image of the "Super Girl."

As Liu Kang (1998) suggests, postreform China often deploys commercial popular culture to disseminate the state-sanctioned free-market ideology. Situating my analysis of the engendering of the *Super Girl* stardom and fandom against the backdrop of China's accelerating marketization and globalization, I propose that the excessive emotional manipulations of the *Super Girl* idol show sentimentalized and reshaped the competition and elimination mechanism of the show into a celebration of a seemingly impossible convergence of social mobility, market individualism, alternative sexuality, and "traditional" female virtues.

### Chinese Television under Globalization: A New Trend

Despite the phenomenal expansion of the Internet in recent years, television broadcasting still secures a dominant position in the industry of mass media in contemporary China. Since the production of the debut television drama *A Mouthful of Vegetable Pancake* (*Yikou cai bingzi*) by Beijing Television in 1958, the Chinese television industry has developed speedily, particularly after the Dengist "Economic Reform and Opening Up" (*gaige*

*kaifang*) launched in 1978. Up to 1987, China had 600 million viewers with 120 million television sets (Guo 2008). In 2005, every 100 urban households owned 130.5 color television sets, whereas every 100 rural households had 109 television sets, color or black-and-white (Landreth 2005). Chinese audiences spent at least three hours in average watching television every day (Ling 2006, 4). By the end of the year 2005, a multilevel and multichannel television-broadcasting network was established with a wide range of broadcasting technologies, including fiber-optic cable, satellite delivery, digital broadcasting system, and the Internet protocol television. There were 2,284 television-broadcasting institutions (including terrestrial broadcasters, educational television stations, and cable stations) that spawned 2,899 sets of television programs for 1.24 billion viewers. The rate of coverage of this enormous television-broadcasting network reached 95.81 percent (Society of China Television Broadcasting 2006).

The extraordinary volume of television programs caused outrageously intense competition among television stations nationwide. Currently, in addition to the state-owned and -controlled flagship news media, the China Central Television (CCTV), with its gigantic and controversial Koohas-designed postmodern headquarter towers lurking against Beijing's skyline, numerous local television stations at provincial, municipal, and county levels vie for a larger market share, which means higher viewers' ratings and commercial profits. In the battlefield of this fiery "eyeball economy," a shortcut proved to be exceptionally efficient and effective in churning out well-received programs at low cost of financial investment and production period. The successful shortcut to attract young urban audiences was to adapt various Euro-American competitive reality shows (à la *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, *Extreme Makeover*, *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* and *Dancing with the Stars*) into indigenous programs by making minor changes, adding local flavor and elements, and conforming to Chinese audiences' viewing habits and state-censorship standards. In the past few years, a large number of Chinese reality shows (*zhenren xiu*) have been produced in this way. The widely viewed ones include *Special 6+1 China Dream* (*Feichang 6+1 mengxiang Zhongguo*) and *Dictionary of Happiness* (*Kaixin cidian*) by the CCTV, *Lycra My Way* (*Laika woxing woxiu*) produced by the Shanghai Dragon Television, *Stars Dancing Contest* (*Wulin dahui*) by the East China Satellite Television, not to mention Hong Kong- and Taiwan-made television programs (Keane, Fung, and Moran 2007).

Overall, the CCTV, with its monopoly on state-controlled resources, still enjoys the lion's share of the television market. However, recently the Hunan Satellite Television (HSTV, or *Hunan weishi* in Chinese), a provincial upstart broadcaster, has gradually risen to challenge the cultural and commercial hegemony of the CCTV. The hinterland province of Hunan has always been regarded as a land with a revolutionary spirit. It has produced numerous reform and revolutionary figures (including Mao Zedong) in modern Chinese history, discussed in depth elsewhere (Platt 2007). In the same spirit of reform and revolution, the HSTV has shown its vitality and determination in revolutionizing provincial-level Chinese television broadcasting network ever since its start on January 1, 1997.

Avoiding politically sensitive topics to bypass the state censorship, the HSTV chooses to focus on the market of young urban audiences between sixteen and twenty-four years old. It spawned a series of popular youth-oriented entertainment programs such as *The Citadel of Happiness* (*Kuaile dabenyang*) and *Romantic Date* (*Meigui zhi yue*) that set records in both viewing figures and advertising revenue (Barboza 2005). The sweeping popularity of these programs has not only established its leading position among local television stations but also decentralized the CCTV's hegemonic control of the mass media at a national level. On top of these exceptional achievements, the unprecedented success of the *Super Girl* talent quest by the HSTV planted the seeds of a revolutionary urban youth culture in presenting Li Yuchun, an idol of androgynous beauty, that would be totally unimaginable for CCTV-style reality shows.

This success immediately raised alarm in both the Administration of Radio Film and Television and the Chinese Propaganda Bureau. The latter's full name is the Chinese Communist Party Central Propaganda Bureau (Zhongguo gongchandang zhongyang xuanchuanbu, often abbreviated as Zhongxuan bu). The Propaganda Bureau controls the state apparatus of the official ideological propaganda. It supervises all the mainland Chinese institutions involved in the production or distribution of cultural products and enforces a strict censorship of news broadcasting, press publications, films, and television programs. In order to understand why Li Yuchun's androgyny was both so popular and so controversial at the same time, we now turn to a discussion of the multiple meanings *Super Girl* produced.

## The *Super Girl* Myth

*Super Girl* has set a new benchmark for subsequent Chinese idol shows in the midst of the recent frenzied competition among Chinese television stations. The Hunan Entertainment Channel and the Shanghai-based Sky Entertainment Corporation (Tianyu chuanmei gongsi) coproduced *Super Male Voice Contest* (*Chaoji nansheng*) in 2003, the first attempt at adapting the reality-contest model for Chinese audiences. *Super Male Voice Contest* achieved regional success within Hunan Province, and in 2004, a female version of the idol show attracted even more contestants, viewers, and commercial sponsors. However, it was not until the year 2005 that the “quasi-documentary” idol contest reached its peak with the *Inner Mongolian Cow Sour Sour Yogurt Happy China Super Girl Voice Contest* (hereafter *Super Girl*). This title is a literal word-by-word translation of the Chinese name of the idol show, named after the major sponsor’s yogurt product. A TV commercial featuring the 2004 *Super Girl* second runner-up enjoying the “Sour Sour Yogurt” was played prior to each episode of the idol show in 2005.

This show has achieved extraordinary popularity all over China as well as among overseas Chinese communities and has run for six seasons so far. However, owing to fierce competition from idol shows of the same type and the tightening control of the Chinese Propaganda Bureau, the glamour of the idol quest gradually faded out. In 2005, the cultural fever aroused by the second season of the *Super Girl* show spread far and wide, reaching an impressive range of social groups and Chinese communities. Starting from May when the nationwide registration for the singing contest began, a set of statistical numbers sent shock waves through Chinese television audiences: more than 150,000 female contestants between the ages of four and eighty-nine registered in the cities of Guangzhou, Zhengzhou, Changsha, Hangzhou, and Chengdou. Surpassing the popularity of the benchmark CCTV *Spring Festival Eve Gala* (*Chunjie wanhui*) and the national news broadcast (*Xinwen lianbo*), the viewers’ ratings of *Super Girl* turned out to be the highest ever in China. Each weekly episode of this most-watched show drew more than 2 million faithful viewers. More than 400 million people tuned in to watch the final contest held on August 25. The Mengniu Dairy Corporation, the show’s primary sponsor, invested 108 million yuan (around US\$15.8 million) in its commercials that

regularly appeared during the broadcasting of the show and unprecedentedly expensive Chinese marketing effort (Tang Delong 2005). Thousands of reports about the show appeared in various mass media, including newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the Internet. Google could easily retrieve 2,550,000 web pages featuring news entries related to the *Super Girl* show. Additionally, the largest Chinese-language Internet content providers such as Sina, Baidu, and Tianya designed special forums dedicated exclusively to massive audiences' discussions, analyses, and debates about the show, which generated tens of millions of postings during and after the show season.

This idol show marked a brand-new social and economic phenomenon (ibid.), with "Have you watched last night's *Super Girl* show?" becoming the most often heard greeting phrase on the street. Indeed, *Super Girl* became one of the most frequently used cultural keywords in 2005 (Dai Xiaolin 2005). An album titled *The Ultimate PK* (Zhongji PK),<sup>1</sup> featuring songs by ten *Super Girl* contestants, sold 650,000 copies within just one month, immediately after the final round of the singing game. The DVD version of the show and a book titled *I Am Crazy about "Super Girl"* (*Wo wei "Chaonü" kuang*) also became instant best-sellers. A series of *Super Girl* performances were held in the ten metropolitan cities all over China and drew millions of fans everywhere, beginning on China's National Day of October 1, 2005. Thanks to its sponsorship of the show, the Mengniu Dairy Corporation doubled its market share, particularly among urban-based young consumers. Its products became the top brand in a shrinking domestic market, and other principal investors of the show including the HSTV, its collaborating Internet portals, and the telecommunications industry all benefited immensely from the program. With the unifying power of a globalizing market, the show not only boosted the growth of Chinese domestic economy but also caused the Hong Kong Weike stocks

1. PK is the abbreviation of "Personal Kill," a term used in video games. It was introduced into the *Super Girl* idol show as a central mechanism of instant elimination. In each episode of the show, two girls were selected to demonstrate their singing skills and compete for popularity among the audience members. The one who received fewer audience votes would be eliminated on the spot. Now PK has been absorbed in the everyday use of Chinese language to refer to any kind of elimination mechanism and competition in any aspect of social life.

to rise 104 percent (*Economic News Daily* 2005). Reaching far beyond the entertainment industry, *Super Girl* became a synonym with for the most successful marketing strategy in China's globalizing economy to date.

What distinguished *Super Girl* from dozens of other Chinese versions of *American Idol*? One main reason was that its rules were unprecedented in the history of Chinese popular culture. Copied from Euro-American predecessors, the *Super Girl* idol show packaged itself as a singing contest open to any female who wanted to follow her dream of performing in front of a vast television audience and becoming instantly famous for thirty seconds. In the first round of screening (*haixuan*), each contestant was given thirty seconds to sing a song of her own choice with no accompanying musical track. According to Wei Wenbin, the head of the Hunan Radio and Television Broadcasting Bureau, "the 'Super Girl' show indicates the advent of a new age of the masses' self-entertainment" (Tang DeLong 2005). He Jiong, a popular young host of *The Citadel of Happiness*, commented: "This show is great because it transforms girls-next-door into pop stars, talented daughters in moms' eyes into talented singers in everyone's eyes!" In other words, both the onstage participants and the audiences in front of the television screen were (self-)identified as "ordinary girls." More significantly, the rules of the singing contest differed radically from conventional CCTV-style evaluations, where the well-educated and senior experts got the unquestionable authority to decide on the contest outcome. Young audiences selected the *Super Girl* winners by sending in cell phone text messages and organizing voting campaigns online and offline.

The text-message voting mechanism triggered a heated discussion in regard to the relation between the Chinese state, civil society, democracy, and text-message voting. One netizen wrote in his blog, "I don't think that I will ever get to vote [for] a president in this lifetime, so I'll elect a girl that I like" (*China Digital Times* 2009). Prominent scholars, public intellectuals, journalists, and anonymous netizens were involved in this intense debate.<sup>2</sup> In addition to innovative game rules in the Chinese context, the show was even more unique and controversial because of its unlikely winner, the

2. The articles and online postings are too numerous to list here. To name a few widely read ones, see 2005 articles by Xu Jilin, Wang Xiaofeng, Ren Woying, Reuters, Ni, and Wang Shuang.

androgynous Li Yuchun, whose ultimate victory resulted from massive fan support via text messages and online portals.

### The Li Yuchun Phenomenon

Labeled the “most unique and cool ‘Super Girl,’” twenty-one-year-old Li Yuchun (also known as Chris Lee) attracted tens of thousands of fans domestically and abroad. Her unequaled popularity whipped up a storm of controversy. The rebellious image of this grassroots idol (*pingmin ouxiang*) defied conventional Chinese criteria for femininity, which aroused a series of debates centering on “androgynous beauty” (*zhongxing mei*) and “Chinese-style feminine beauty” (*Zhongguo shi meiniü*). While her fans (mostly young girls) imitated her fashion style and behavioral manner and publicized passionate love letters to her online, more conservative audiences called this visually ambiguous figure “ladyboy” (*renyao*). Never wearing a skirt or heavy makeup, Li was said to be a “very boyish and unfashionable girl” (Zhao Yu 2005).

Li had a lanky figure with no prominent markers of physical sex. Her “masculine” facial features were said to resemble the traits of Yao Ming, the macho basketball player and the embodiment of China’s globalizing sports market. Li often performed with her trademark orange-tinged spiky hair, husky voice, and Ricky Martin-style Latin dance steps. Additionally, her most well-known song was “In My Heart There’s Only You, Never Her” (Wode xinli zhiyou ni, meiyou ta), a golden oldie originally sung by Liu Wenzheng, a male Taiwanese singer. Well loved for “being herself,” a cool and handsome tomboy rather than a pretty and gentle girl, Li, the authorities’ least-favored contestant, achieved the ultimate victory of the singing contest. The zealous support of her admirers changed the final outcome with 3,528,308 SMS (short-message services via cell phones) votes of all the 8 million SMS votes in the final week of the show.

Immediately after the end of the contest, Li Yuchun featured in commercial advertisements for domestic and foreign products such as Swatch and Coca-Cola. Within twenty-four hours after Li won the *Super Girl* contest, the “Divine Vehicle” (Shenzhou) Computer Company paid a million yuan (approximately US\$150,000) to sign Li to be the spokeswoman for their high-end laptop. The company explained that they had handpicked her to do the computer commercial in the hope that their electronic



products could become renowned and increase in value overnight, just as Li herself had done (*Southern Metro Daily* 2005). Capitalizing on the androgynous exteriority of the pop star, the Amoi Cell Phone Company paid Li an even higher price to advertise its new model, the “Straight and Handsome” (*Zhishuai*) cell phone. This innovative marketing strategy grabbed a huge market share, particularly among young urban consumers (Mai Jieying and Fang Nan 2005). These marketing campaigns further commodified and monetized the androgynous image of the youth idol. Meanwhile, they also crystallized the market-oriented competition mentality behind the *Super Girl* singing game.

In addition, Li’s androgynous image graced the covers of widely read Chinese and English magazines such as the *New Weekly* (*Xin zhoukan*), *Sanlian Life Weekly* (*Sanlian shenghuo zhoukan*), *South People Weekly* (*Nanfang renwu zhoukan*), and *Time Asia*, and she was listed as one of Asia’s heroes in 2005. Put in the category of “iconoclasts,” she was said to be “defying pop star formulas” and marking the new trend of being innovative and true-to-self in radically changing times (Jakes 2005). In 2008, she was selected as number one in the “Fifty Most Beautiful People in China” (Sina 2009), sparking an online debate. Li’s critics called her “Brother Chun” (*Chun Ge*) or “100% Macho Man” (*chun yemen*), suggesting that Li was too masculine to be considered a beautiful woman. On the other side, Li’s supporters praised her “natural beauty” unmarred by trendy makeup or plastic surgery. One female admirer commented, “She is simple, pure, clean and neat. She will never please men with sex.”

One of the widely read and much-debated articles on Li’s androgynous beauty was by Cheng Naishan, a prominent woman writer. This article was titled “Androgynous Beauty Is a Purely Women’s View of Beauty” (*Zhongxing mei shi chuncui nuxing xinli de shenmei* [2009]). According to Cheng, Li’s androgynous beauty represents a global trend for modern women to prefer simplicity: short hair, an austere shirt, pants, and flat-heeled shoes. Cheng suggests that modern women do not admire traditional beauties whose hair is long and who adorn themselves with delicate makeup and exquisite clothing items. In conclusion, Cheng calls androgynous beauty a “feminist view of beauty” because it reflects women’s views rather than male desires. However, she adds, this view of beauty is popular only among youth because women outgrow these tastes after their rebellious years. Following Cheng’s article, some commentators agreed with

her that androgynous beauty gives women more freedom in their lifestyle choices, while others criticized Cheng's "feminist tendency" to erase the essential gender differences between men and women.

A piece of representative criticism of Cheng's view was published by a netizen called Xiubo Shanren (2009) in his or her blog. In this article titled "Cheng Naishan: Why Do You Praise the 'Androgynous Beauty'?" (Cheng Naishan: Fukua zhongxingmei wei naban?), Xiubo Shanren countered Cheng's argument that androgynous beauty is a global trend. The author gave a long list of examples of feminine Euro-American celebrities including Madonna and Princess Diana. Toward the end of the article, Xiubo Shanren concludes, "The groundless excessive compliments on 'androgynous beauty' can only mislead women's view of beauty. Did we lack this 'androgynous beauty' during the Cultural Revolution? Those Red Guards in loose-fitting male military outfits looked so androgynous. You call that beauty?"

Obviously, economic and cultural globalization has shaped contemporary Chinese people's view of femininity. People like Xiubo Shanren celebrate stereotypically feminine Euro-American celebrities as an antidote to the Maoist model of "Iron Girl" or "Red Guard" androgyny. The chaos in sexual politics is also a common theme in post-Mao "Scar Literature" (*shanghen wenxue*), as Kam Louie (2003) suggests. In a similar vein, Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (1999) also argues that China's entrance into a global capitalist system can help liberate women's sexual desire and individual agency long suppressed by the Maoist revolution. Through establishing individual identity grounded in reinscribing the "erased" gender differences on sexualized bodies, women are able to carve out "a space of their own" from the state intervention. However, the overemphasis on polarized gender differences tends to lead to the production of a universal and essentialized gendered subject. Furthermore, this prevailing globalization of consumable feminine images also causes standardization, commercialization, and objectification of women's body and sexuality.

### **Virtual Community, Virtual Sisterhood**

Since the mid-1990s, China has witnessed a revolution in Internet culture. Up to July 21, 2005, the population of Chinese Internet users was more than 103 million (CNNIC 2005). In July 2008, the number of cyber

citizens in China was more than 253 million, and China surpassed the United States to become the largest Internet-using population in the world (Zhao Jin 2009). With such a colossal number of users, the Internet has become one of the major venues to spread news, gossip, rumors, and public opinions in contemporary China. It is particularly notable that when the Chinese Communist Party sought to bring more openness and transparency to Chinese society, they chose to charm the web-savvy younger generation by chatting online with them (Cha 2009).

Cyber citizens valued the way the Internet made interactive communication between distant people possible and enabled high volumes of information to be mass disseminated. The anonymity, speed, and illusionary sense of security and equality brought about by the Internet made possible a new virtual public sphere where participants celebrated freedom of speech. Ai Weiwei, an artist who helped design the Beijing Olympic stadium known as the “Bird Nest,” hoped that the popularity of the Internet in contemporary China could pave the way to freedom of speech and participatory democracy. He said, “As long as people care about society’s problems, they will go to the Web to look for information” (Jacobs 2009).

A netizen calling himself or herself Wen Zhongsi (literally “Thoughts of Writing”) posted an article titled “Online Freedom of Speech Is a Good Thing” (Wangluo yanlun ziyou shi ge hao dongxi), stating that the “Chinese Internet has been the testing forum of freedom of speech since its birth” (2007). Similarly, in his January 14, 2007, MSN blog, Kai Guo wrote that the “Internet is the public sphere where we enjoy the freedom of speech to a greatest extent. I steadfastly support maximum tolerance towards all the online comments and speeches.” Others endorsed Kai Guo’s view. Netizen Xiao Gang wrote: “This is our freedom declaration, made for our freedom of speech. I don’t want China to go back to the past era of Culture Prison or Cultural Revolution. What is wrong with China?” (2009). Countless online articles and comments of this type demonstrate Chinese netizens’ yearning for the ultimate fulfillment of freedom of speech and their criticisms of China’s current policy in regard to this issue.

The largest group of netizens, constituting 30.3 percent of users, is urban-based high school and college students ranging from eighteen to twenty-four years old, also the dominant demographic group of the *Super Girl* audience (Dai Zhikang 2008, 12; Qian Qing 2005). Obviously, the new medium of the Internet has played a pivotal role in the formation and

shaping of *Super Girl*. The Internet provided easy access to public debates for marginalized and underrepresented social groups such as women, young people, and minority communities. Many grassroots stars such as Sister Hibiscus (*Furong jiejie*) and Back Dorm Boys (*Houshe nansheng*) achieved instant celebrity in the unbounded space of the Internet.

Similar to Li Yuchun, Sister Hibiscus is a girl-next-door-turned-star. Born in 1977 in a small rural village in the Shaanxi Province, she went to Beijing to take the entrance examinations for the graduate school of the Beijing University and the Tsinghua University. She became famous in 2004 for posting her saucy photos and writings on the bulletin-board system (BBS) of the Tsinghua University and Beijing University, which drew tens of thousands of hits each day. This “Sister Hibiscus” cultural phenomenon characterizes a case of rural women seeking to participate in a global cosmopolitan modernity through their bodily practices.<sup>3</sup> The “Back Dorm Boys” is a parody of the “Back Street Boys.” Two college boys studying at the Central Fine Arts Institute (Zhongyang meishu xueyuan) created a series of hilarious videos of their lip-synching to Back Street Boys hit songs and circulated them online. As a result of the wild popularity of these videos, they became leading figures of the contemporary Chinese “spoof culture” (*egao wenhua*).

The Internet also brings stars close to their fans since stars keep blogs, posting pictures of their daily lives, keeping their readers updated on performance information, new hairstyles, and other personal trivia, and sometimes even revealing the daily fluctuations of their feelings and emotions. All these activities successfully bridge the vast distance between idols and their adherents and give readers the impression that stars are just average people. This “everyman aesthetic” (Keane, Fung, and Moran 2007) worked effectively among the youthful supporters of *Super Girl* idols.

Since the release of the first entry on December 23, 2005, Li’s blog (<http://blog.sina.com.cn/liyuchun>) has been read 14,369,709 times. It promotes her latest album and advertises links to her fans’ online networks. There are thousands of responses to each blog. The online comments reveal that teenage girls constitute the majority of Li’s fans, who gave themselves

3. For a detailed discussion of this cultural icon, see Xiao Hui, 2006. Also see Cody 2005.

the name “corn” (*yumi*). *Yu* is a homophone of the first character of Li Yuchun’s given name, and *mi* is a homophone of the character that means “fans.” The association with food (corn) rendered the young (and dominantly) female fans consumable as they avidly consumed the star image of their idol. Thus, a virtual sisterhood has been forged between the girl-next-door-turned-star and her numerous adherents who sought a nonorthodox venue to break through the mainstream culture promulgated by the system of mandatory education and school life. Through interacting in online communities, young girls were able to make sense of their daily life and express their dreams, ideas, values, desires, and sentiments about coming of age during a rapidly changing period of time.

For example, responding to the first blog that Li Yuchun composed after the closure of the *Super Girl* show, many of her fans showed their support and enthusiasm. While some elderly commentators such as Qingfeng called Li a young kid and asked if she was male or female, Li’s fans used the words *handsome* (*shuaiqi*) and *cool* (*ku*), normally applied to good-looking males, to praise her performance. One commentator, Snay, wrote on December 29, 2005, “I like you because I like girls who are true to themselves.” Another enthusiast, Pianzi, wrote on December 30, 2005, “I never thought that I would love a girl so much, even more than I love a man.” Some more conservative commentators inquired about scandalous “lesbian photos” (see below) and Li’s sexual orientation in their commentary. One netizen, Huadan, wrote on January 18, 2006, “Is Li Yuchun a Lala [Chinese nickname for lesbian]? Why have I seen more and more Lala on the street after TA becomes a superstar?”<sup>4</sup> These comments raised sensitive issues that could never be discussed in school or at home. Li’s fans such as Kegie and Zhgzh responded, “We don’t mind if you are lesbian or not. We just support you!”

Li’s fans also had their own websites. One of the largest fan clubs is the forum called the Li Yuchun Posting Bar (Li Yuchun tieba), established at Baidu.com, the leading search engine in China (CNNIC 2005). The Posting Bar is a new type of electronic BBS invented by Baidu. Unlike a

4. TA is the Pinyin romanization for both Chinese characters 她 (she) and 他 (he). The online commentator used TA instead of a gendered pronoun to emphasize the sexual ambiguity of the androgynous pop icon.

conventional BBS, all the postings on the forum are dedicated to a single subject, such as a megahit television show, a pop show, a pop star, a leisure activity, or a social issue. Theoretically, anyone can start such a “Posting Bar” on any subject matter. The easy accessibility provides technical support for the formation of virtual communities sharing a common interest, goal, or identity. There are hundreds of “Posting Bars” dedicated to pop stars, but the one devoted to Li always ranks the highest with its 2,377,000 topic threads, 46,636,633 postings, and 52,101 members, the numbers of which are still increasing each day. Occasionally, Li herself logs in and chats online with her fans.

Many posts speculated about Li’s romantic life and sexual orientation. Many stories concerned Li’s possible “homoerotic relationships” with other contestants. For example, in one episode of *Super Girl* broadcast on July 15, 2005, Li sang a popular love song, “You Are the Most Precious” (*Ni zui zhengui*), with Zhang Liangying, another contestant. Fans wrote enthusiastically about their onstage improvisation of holding hands and staring at each other “lovingly.” One admirer, who appears from her Internet ID and profile to be a teenage girl, wrote: “I believe at that moment Liangying must have fallen in love with Yuchun. At that moment in Liangying’s heart Yuchun is the angel who guards her through the dark night. At that moment in Liangying’s heart Yuchun is the most precious one. I was so fascinated that my eyes were glued to them. I wish I could indulge myself in romantic love together with them” (<http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kz=114444344>). The fantasized female-female homoerotic practices worked as “a disruptor of heterosexuality, a presence standing outside the conventions of patriarchy, a hole in the fabric of gender dualism” (Zimmerman 1992, 4). In other words, the imaginary female-female homoerotic relationship challenges the universal model of heterosexual romance prevailing on television in contemporary China. This homoerotic fantasy does not necessarily cause girls to see themselves as lesbians. Rather, homoerotic romance gives girls a sense of empowerment and agency by undermining the dominant views of love and sexuality that always envision a woman’s body as the passive object of male desire. Many of Li’s fans revealed that they liked her because she did not make herself “sexy” or “feminine” in compliance with social gender norms. One netizen, Nanyumi, commented on Li’s blog on January 4, 2006, “Many of my female friends told me they wish they were boys because they just want to be as free and unrestrained as boys.”

Li's success on the Internet and on *Super Girl* both mark and promote a significant shift in Chinese gender ideology. Li's popularity even changed the conventional Chinese preference for boys of at least one television viewer, who wrote, "I always hoped that my wife could give birth to a boy. Watching the show totally changed my idea" (Lu Jun 2005). Many gay and lesbian people chose to come out of the closet online and established virtual communities such as the "Les Posting Bar." Chen Bo, a good-looking young man living in the Chongqing city of Sichuan Province, underwent a sex-change operation and publicly pronounced that he hoped to become another *Super Girl* idol and sing a song together with Li in the future (Zhou Rui 2005).

Yet attitudes clearly do not change overnight, as was evident when a controversy arose involving pictures of a young woman, who strongly resembled Li, kissing another woman that began to circulate online in August 2005. It significantly compromised Li's image as a pure and innocent girl and even jeopardized her chances of winning the contest. The "inside story" that Li was a lesbian quickly sparked a large-scale personal attack on her (Wei Hong 2005), and her previous image of being a pure and innocent girl was on the verge of collapse. This incident revealed the tensions between androgyny as an index of female power and homoeroticism as a radical challenge to family and gender roles.

### Melodramatic Structure of Feeling

The unregulated and rapid circulation of information on the Internet resulted in the creation of a whole series of "inside stories" about the *Super Girl* show that were as significant in determining the outcome of the contest as were the televised performances. These "inside stories" transformed the relentless competition among 150,000 young girls into a real-time unscripted melodrama that was able to fulfill people's voyeuristic desire and sense of mass participation at the same time.

In her study of melodramatic narratives, Linda Williams defines the melodramatic mode as "a peculiarly democratic and American form that seeks dramatic revelation of moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos and action" (1998, 42). She proposes the three-stage model of "guilt-punishment-redemption" typical of melodramas with female protagonists, and this model fits the story of Li and the lesbian photos well.

In the first stage, Li's carefully constructed image of absolute purity and innocence was threatened by the wide dissemination of the homosexual photographs, which were condemned by conservative social commentators. In response, Li Yuchun made a public speech in the following week's segment of the *Super Girl* show, claiming that she was wronged and had nothing to do with the controversial photos. Confirming her honesty and moral integrity, Li's family stated that she was the same pure and honest girl as before the show.

Subsequently, during the broadcasting of the semifinals on August 19, Li suddenly burst into tears when another contestant, who had been a student at Li's school, was eliminated after three rounds of competition and voting off. Li cried so hard that she almost passed out, and this melodramatic display of emotion further resuscitated her image as a pure, unsophisticated, and honest girl who valued friendship over winning. The tears shed on and off the screen provided audiences with a great sense of moral satisfaction and thus strengthened their support for her. The pathos aroused by the virtuous suffering of a female figure ensured the continuity of the melodramatic narrative of *Super Girl* and made it possible to achieve the final happy ending, in the form of the champion title for Li Yuchun and huge commercial profits for the show's major investors and sponsors. The young audiences took an ambiguous position here: on the one hand, they were drawn to Li's androgynous beauty that defied current polarized gender roles, while on the other hand, they made Li conform to public morals by portraying her as a pure and innocent girl. The girls were clearly trying to reconcile female power with traditional values promoted by a current resurgence of patriarchy. In recent years, the revival of Confucian ethics under state sponsorship has caused gender conservatism and reassertion of patriarchy. Boundaries between male versus female and public versus private have been redrawn. Essential gender difference and traditional femininity that places great value on woman's moral purity, virtues, and civility have been promoted.

Drawing on Christine Gledhill's view on individual ego and performance, Williams adeptly analyzes the reliance on personality in melodramatic mode:

Adapting Peter Brooks's notion that amid the collapse of the sacred as the standard of value, the individual ego became "the measure of all



things,” Gledhill argues that this reduction of morality to an individual embodiment of ethical forces prepared the way for the psychologization of character and the performance orientation of twentieth-century popular culture. Faced with the familiar dilemmas of modernity—the decentered self, the failure of language to say what it meant—melodrama responded with a heightened personalization and expression of the self. The cult of the star fed into this personalization. The contemporary phenomenon of the commodified star whose task is not so much to act as it is to embody a “truthful” “presence”—an authentic performance of his or her “self.” (ibid., 78)

This passage illustrates precisely how the performance of the true self of a *Super Girl* idol was constructed out of the very surface of the televisual representation of her physical exteriority. All through the show time, *self* (*ziwo*), *individuality* (*gexing*), *quality* (*suzhi*) (Keane, Fung, and Moran 2007), as well as *purity* (*chunjie*) and *truthfulness* (*chunzhen*) were the most celebrated buzzwords in Li’s “Posting Bar.” The strictest moral standards were applied to Li as well as other girl contestants, who were often evaluated not for their singing skills but for their “natural” revelation of their true self, purity, and moral innocence.

Writing about the recent Japanese teenager fad *Sailor Moon*, an anime (animated cartoon) of *bishôjo hirô* (beautiful girl heroes), Anne Allison analyzes how the teenage girl warriors combine superpower action with attractive and cute appearance. Allison observes that “given that powerful women cause such discomfort for men and for society in general, they can only be tolerated by being assigned, or by themselves adopting, a (traditionally) ‘feminine’ masquerade: klutzy, inept, sexy, pretty” (2006, 144). Similarly, Li Yuchun’s deliberate androgynization undermined prevailing feminine fashion to establish a more powerful female role. However, as in Japan, female power must be muted and cannot appear to undermine men. Thus, when Li appeared to go too far, she was attacked as a lesbian but was able to win back public approval by appearing to be an innocent, asexual girl with conventional feminine virtues of gentility, virginity, and moral purity.

Under such public scrutiny and emotional investment, feminine purity and absolute good are represented as constantly in danger of contamination that necessitates constant cleansing through excessive tears

and virtuous suffering. In other words, the magic enchantment of the reality show comes precisely from its moral appeal through portraying young girls' feminized victimhood. Turning a singing contest into a nationwide election for moral models, the great power of affects in this melodramatic account of subject formation transmuted ephemeral televisual signals into universal moral legibility. Thus, "super girls" grew from nobodies to superstars as well as the embodiment of absolute good and innocence that society was said to have lost in an era of dizzyingly fast paradigmatic shift. In this sense, Li's "revolutionary" image of androgynous beauty fell back into the stock gender role of the virtuous victim. The combined forces of commercial culture, renovated Confucian ethics, and state censorship set limits on the rebellious potential of Li's star image. Thus, the gender norms questioned by Li's androgyny are ultimately reinforced in compliance with the demand of a state-regulated popular-culture market.

### Feminine Masculinity or Masculine Femininity?

The *Super Girl* show also had a huge base of fans among Chinese diasporas who pointed to Li as the embodiment of Chinese national values. But this discourse on the made-in-China pop star often overlooked the fact that the new idol was aesthetically transnational and culturally hybrid rather than purely Chinese. Talking about androgyny and cultural identity under globalization, Lingchei Letty Chen acutely points out, "As a human figure embodying dual sexuality, androgyny serves as a metaphor for hybridity and the androgynous voice is a voice that articulates alternatives, not erases differences" (2006, 88). In other words, the androgynous image of Li Yuchun defies as much the cultural binaries of "Chinese versus the foreign Other" as gender dichotomies. The warm reception of Li's androgynous image among global Chinese communities revealed constant border-crossing cultural flows and integrations in the East Asian region.

Since the late 1970s, foreign films and television dramas have come to dominate the Chinese cultural market, as well as the popular imagination of a new lifestyle and its accompanying structure of feeling. Through the regional distribution of these seminal cultural products, a media regionalism was spurred by "the development of consumerism and electronic communication technology" (Iwabuchi 2001). Chinese audiences passionately embraced Japanese television miniseries and anime (animated

programs and films). Since 1991, the particular *manga* (comics) genre “Boys’ Love” (also known as *Yaoi*) has been imported into China and became extremely popular among Chinese urban girls (Welker 2006). The authors and readers of “Boys’ Love” comic books are exclusively young girls, while the fictional characters are adolescent homosexual boys (*bishonen*) with seductive androgynous beauty. The new century has witnessed the rapid proliferation of “Boys’ Love” comic books, stories and novels, magazines, and anime produced by young Chinese women. Numerous websites including general BBSs, fan clubs, and video-sharing portals were designed to provide forums for the distribution, appreciation, and discussion of these works. The most frequently visited ones include Bgl.cn, Blsu.com.cn, Blmoyu.com, Be-boy.cn, and so on.

Depicting the androgynous-looking teenage boys’ romantic love, the palpable craze for this particular *manga* genre seriously challenges conventional gender norms. The chic-looking youngsters with stunning appearances in the “Boys’ Love” *manga* transform condemned homosexuality into an icon of “cool kid” (*ku er*, the Chinese translation of “queer”), similar to Li’s much-acclaimed cool image. Perhaps coincidentally, many postings centering on imagined romances between Li and other contestants took a similar *manga* form. These romantic and ambiguous homoerotic stories were often released frame by frame, with each frame composed of a well-taken close-up photo of a couple of intimate contestants and one or two lines of caption. This online *manga* format created and circulated among fan clubs provided a new language of visual icons and verbal signs for the young audiences to produce an alternative imagination about gender relationships within the boundaries of cyberspace.

Taiwanese popular culture played a pivotal role in translating Japanese “Boys’ Love” *manga* into Chinese. This genre, mediated by Taiwanese translation, spread to mainland Chinese youngsters who look to the androgynous beautiful boys as a new model of beauty and sexual imagination. Similarly, the 1998 Taiwanese film *Bishonen* (*Meishaonian zhilian*, literally *A Love Story of Beautiful Boys*) portrayed a tragic love story between two beautiful young men and was adapted into a “Boys’ Love” *manga* by its avid Japanese fans. Based on Kamio Yoko’s popular Japanese *manga*, *Boys over Flowers* (*Hana yori dango*), another trend-setting Taiwanese idol drama, *The Meteor Garden* (*Liuxing huayuan* [2001]), featured four male protagonists who were collectively called F4, with *F* standing for “flower.”

Famous for their physical beauty, they were called flowerlike beautiful men (*huayang meinan*), a metaphor usually devoted to pretty women. Having witnessed the regional popularity of *The Meteor Garden*, the HSTV invested a mainland Chinese version starring indigenous idols produced by its 2007 *Happy Boy* (*Kuaile nansheng*) talent show, the male version of *Super Girl*. The steady cultural flow and interpenetration helped propagate an emerging model of androgynous beauty, which rewrote the masculinity definition visualized normally by modern (read: Hollywood-standardized) muscular “tough guys.” This model captured the pulse of trendy youth culture that yearned to challenge the heterosexual hegemony through experimenting with nonconformist sexual desire and gender identity.

Through the regional production, distribution, and reception of these popular melodramatic narratives, the legitimacy of the conventional sexual division of labor and absolute authority of patriarchs were generally undermined. Li’s androgynous look could be read as a Chinese mirror image of the new feminine masculinity (or masculine femininity?) circulated in the Pan-Asian media coverage and popular-culture flows. This new type of androgynous beauty appeals to modern youth in China, first of all because of the glamour associated with the stars’ images and their chic lifestyle, which provides the young demographic a space of imagination, identification, and self-expression of a cosmopolitan youth identity through consuming what they view as sophisticated commodities and visual cultural products. Furthermore, the ambiguity embedded in the popularity of feminine masculinity and masculine femininity enables young people to challenge conventional gender norms and explore alternative possibilities for performing gender identities. In this sense, the duality of regional politics and a globalized economy plays a significant role in the subject making of Chinese women through the mechanism of melodramatic representations.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I examined the phenomenal popularity of the *Super Girl* talent show, a Chinese spin-off of *American Idol*, in a larger sociocultural context of contemporary Chinese society under globalization. Through a close analysis of audience reaction to the androgynous beauty of the “super girl,” Li Yuchun, I explore the possibilities of forging virtual sisterhood in

virtual online communities that often transcend the geographical boundaries of Chinese territory. This new type of female bonding centering upon an unconventional image of the new idol rewrites the femininity-masculinity definitions, and provides a powerful venue for young Chinese females to negotiate their cultural, ethnic, and gender identities. As a result, they are enabled to explore possibilities of alternative imaginations of self-image, intimate relationships, and sexual desires.

However, the “revolutionary” force of the model of androgynous beauty should not be overestimated. On the one hand, Li embodies young girls’ desire to be liberated from time-honored prescribed gender roles; on the other hand, their phantasmagoric desire projected on the androgynous figure is often articulated in the grammar and vocabulary of melodramas that tend to locate purity and innocence as key female virtues. Additionally, the instant commodification of the androgynous figure in various television commercial marketing campaigns reveals the ultimate neoliberal logic of the idol contest, which makes it “politically compatible” (Keane, Fung, and Moran 2007, 171) with the official ideology of a market economy with “Chinese characteristics.”

Under the great pressure of reorientation to survive in the neoliberal market economy, Chinese audiences project their yearning for “traditional virtues,” which are supposedly long lost in the alienating and value-disintegrating development of the market economy, on the idealized image of the “super girl.” In this sense, the immense appeal of *Super Girl* lies mainly in its melodramatic narrative and emotional investment, which transforms the show into a staging of various desires, sentiments, and fantasies engendered by the subject-making forces of the globalizing market economy, trans-East Asian cultural flows, and state ideology.