Paradise and Paradox: On the Super Voice Girls
Elementary Discussion on Popular Culture, Youth, Media and State Politics of Contemporary China

by

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Abstract

This paper investigates the Super Voice Girl show (超级女声) as a popular music outlet and cultural product of contemporary China. Focusing on three important contexts of the Super Voice Girl show—the industrial, value and ethical foundations, this piece of work demonstrates that the popular cultural outlet, combined with new technologies of mass communication and the new market economy in the Chinese society today, has made a contribution to enabling Chinese youth, in particular, Chinese young women to gain access to achieving a new voice. The three foundations provide people with an opportunity to have a comprehensive understanding about the key elements or fundamental concepts of this new public voice, including the industrial chain of the show, the aspiration for democracy, the subversion of feminist right awareness against traditional ethical outlook or patriarchy-dominated ethical view, and the impact of media propaganda on youth and so on.
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Introduction

Asked any teenage girl to name the finalists of [2005] Super Girl show and chances are she will instantly come up with the three big names. She will probably also rhyme off those of other noteworthy performers, and be able to describe in detail their vocal traits and even their hairstyles.

However, when recently asked to name the presidents of the People’s Republic of China, 14-year-old junior high school student Zheng Chenrui responded in a way also typical of Chinese teenagers. She gave three names, and then hesitated: “I have to turn to our history teacher for the rest of them.”

This perhaps precisely reveals the outstanding magic power of the Super Girl show toward Chinese youth. Super Girl, also known as “Super Voice Girl,” is a civilian singing contest for Chinese young women launched by Hunan Satellite TV Station and sponsored by Mingniu Diary. The 2005 Super Girl show captured attentions of millions of people across China, becoming one of the most-watched programs and one of the most popular programs among Chinese youth. Those young viewers, like the one described in the prologue, may be of a much more intimate familiarity with the Super Girl performers or pop idols than the presidents of China.

But is the significance of the Super Girl show to contemporary Chinese youth merely in its establishing entertainment idols for youth or in its enriching cultural life for youth? People would have a positive answer if they regard this show simply as a recreation activity or entertainment show.

This paper, however, will thoroughly interpret cultural codes of the Super Voice Girl

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2 Ibid.
contest as a cultural event in modern China, which mainly include investigating the industrial, value and ethical foundations of the show. The industrial foundation refers to the economic basis and industrial chain of the Super Girl show. It explores not only how the sponsor—Mengniu Diary, the initiator—Hunan Satellite TV Station and the telecommunication operator make profits, but also how the Super Girl show is associated with the enterprise culture. The discussion of ethical foundation aims at the subversion of feminist right awareness against traditional ethical outlook or patriarchy-dominated ethical view. The essence of value foundation involves three crucial values or notions raised from the Super Girl contest: Democratic aspiration, individual emancipation and equal participation.

By the investigation of these cultural codes this paper will make the following argument: The industrial, value and ethical foundations have profoundly realistic significances for contemporary Chinese youth. First of all, the media propaganda campaigns with Chinese characteristics to promote the Super Girl show, as an indispensable part of the industrial chain, are to lead young people’s opinion and thereby depriving Chinese youth of free discussion of public events.

Second of all, the significance of the value foundation is threefold. Primarily, the democracy-related practice in the voting process of the Super Girl contest, which has given rise to an explosive debate among Chinese scholars, promotes the dissemination of democratic spirits and principles among Chinese youth. Next, the implication of individual emancipation for youth is in motivating young people to make
self-improvement and show their uniqueness, in order to survive in a more and more vigorous competition for employment opportunities. Moreover, the notion of equal participation concerns about achieving young people’s, in particular, young women’s equal right to participate in political and public affairs. All of these three principles contribute to specifying the significance of the notion of “value foundation” for Chinese youth.

Third of all, the meaning of the ethical foundation for youth group is in its reflecting contemporary Chinese women’s desire for and anxiety about female discourse power and in encouraging young women to strive for gender equality by subverting the patriarchy-dominated ethics. It can be viewed as an extended discussion about the notion of “equal participation.” More broadly speaking, through this argumentative approach the paper is intended to lead people to think about the social befall of contemporary Chinese youth and their spiritual struggles against the reality. The Super Girl show as a cultural product bears a social and ethical function.

This paper is organized as follows: The section “Selected Literature Review” will provide readers with an overview on the studies of Chinese youth culture and Super Girls by contemporary Chinese academia and, more importantly, point out some theoretical defects in current studies. The second section “Biography of the Super Girls,” as a starting point (切入点) of interpreting the Super Girl show, will focus on looking through advertisings of the Super Girl show, by which the paper will investigate the cultural representations of the advertisings. This is inspired by Stuart Hall’s approach to
understanding representation (表象) and to gaining access to the cultural codes behind the representation. The third section “Industrial Foundation of the Super Girl Show” mainly underlines the propaganda campaigns of media as a critical part of the industrial chain and emphasizes the role of media propaganda in leading public, especially, young people’s opinion. The fourth section “Value Foundation of the Super Girl Show,” comprised of three sub-sections or three values, is to further embody the cultural codes. It will exhibit the debate between different schools of thoughts of Chinese scholars upon the democratic issues and show some statistical data associated with Chinese women’s social and political status. The fifth section “Ethical Foundation of the Super Girl Show” will interpret the feminist discourse through interpreting the image of Li Yuchun, champion of the 2005 Super Girl contest. This is, again, to adopt Hall’s approach to cultural codes. The section “Conclusion” as the final part will offer an evaluation of the role and significance of the Super Girl show for Chinese youth.

**Selected Literature Review**

Firstly, Chinese academic circles have not reached an agreement about the democracy-related factors or issues in the Super Girl show. This disagreement can be identified by investigating two schools of thoughts on the Super Girls. One is Xu Jilin, professor of Department of History at the East China Normal University, the other is Cui Hall, Stuart. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (2003). Oxford.
Weiping, professor of Department of Elementary Education at Beijing Film Academy. Professor Xu suggests that there is no relationship between the Super Girl show and democracy. His argument is based on a comprehensive and meticulous theory of political democracy, which underlines the importance of ultimate decisive power of the general public, of transparent and reliable procedure, of free discussion of the public, proposed by Habermas, and of equal opportunity to vote.\(^4\) Professor Cui, however, emphasizes that the hot discussions about the Super Girls on the Internet render the show accessible to the public, refuting Xu’s viewpoint that the free discussion is lacking. She further argues that the spirit of democracy is not something unfathomable and unattainable. This paper will not only provide detail information of the debate, but also explore the significance of this debate to contemporary Chinese youth.

Secondly, there is a tendency to separate the research on the Super Voice Girls and the research on contemporary Chinese youth culture. Put another way, the role of the Super Girl show in contemporary Chinese youth culture has not been substantially recognized and discussed by present Chinese academia.

Some scholars have made a comprehensive overview of contemporary Chinese youth culture. For example, in *Introduction to Chinese Youth*, Jieying Xi, researcher and director and academic committee of China Youth and Children Research Center, has done an excellent job in emphasizing China’s rapid social changes over past two decades that

influence the life style of Chinese youth or post-80s in economic, social and psychological facets. This scholar summarizes eight characteristics of contemporary Chinese youth, including salient self-value orientation and practical behaviors, strong patriotism and active service for the society, great improvement in youth educational and scientific quality, new main force of employment with constantly rising social status, more freedom in love and marriage and more open about sex, rich leisure life and main body of digital life, marriage peak of first generation only-children and youth unemployment and delinquency.\footnote{Jieying, Xi (2006). \textit{Introduction To Chinese Youth}. In Jieying Xi, Yunxiao, Sun & Jingjian Xiao (Eds.), \textit{Chinese Youth In Transition} (pp. 79-96). Ashgate, USA. pp. 84-90.}

The author concerns about the social and cultural contexts that the Chinese youth grow. The eight characteristics of contemporary Chinese youth identified by the article provide readers with an access to understanding the opportunities and challenges that Chinese youth face in the period of China’s social and economic transition. The opportunities they face are increased opportunities to receive better education and study abroad, more knowledge and skills in technological industries, more social mobility resulted from the weakening household register system and so on. The challenges they encounter include employment difficulty, delinquency, and insufficient ability to adapt them to society due to the first one-child generation spoiled by parents and so on. The author actually provides people with an investigative report on the living conditions and social environment of contemporary Chinese youth, highlighting social context—China’s
reform and opening-up policy, values and behaviors.

Unlike Jieying Xi’s approach to Chinese youth, Changzheng Yang, Deputy Executive Secretary General and Deputy Executive Director of China Youth and Children Research Association, made an excellent summary about the causes of popular culture among Chinese youth. This scholar classified the causes into three types of factors, exterior, interior and channel. In the article *Popular Culture among Chinese Youth*, Yang adopts a socio-psychological approach to interpreting popular culture, asserting that the phenomenon of youth popular culture epitomizes characteristics of contemporary Chinese youth. “Socio-psychologists think that the reason for people to follow the fashion, on the one hand, is out of the ‘coordinative desire’……and getting adjusted to the society, and on the other hand, is out of the ‘differential desire’. ”\(^{6}\) In other words, contemporary young people are likely to be mimicking and following others, who lead the fashion, since they do not want to be marginalized or isolated from their peers. On the other hand, they are eager to show their personal position and individuality and to “go after freedom and progress.”\(^{7}\) Regardless of the titles, such as Jieying Xi’s overview on Chinese youth and Changzheng Yang’s study on popular culture among youth, the Super Girls show has not entered the field of the studies of contemporary Chinese youth.

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\(^{7}\) Ibid.
Biography of the Super Girls

The story begins with the advertisings of the Super Voice Girl show. The purpose of this section is to provide people with an opportunity to get familiar with the representative characteristics of this civilian show.

Figure-1
The Call-For-Participation Advertising of the Super Girl Contest
(Guangzhou Division)⁸

Figure-2
The Call-For-Participation Advertising of the Super Girl Contest⁹

⁸ http://image.baidu.com
⁹ Ibid.
Firstly, the discussion will focus on the call-for-participation advertising. It is worthwhile to note that there are two types of call-for-participation advertisings for the Super Girl contest. One is posted as a slogan, as shown in the picture: The Super Voice Girl (the Super Girl) and the sponsor’s name, Mengniu Diary, with a young, innocent and beautiful girl holding a soft drink which is Mengniu’s product. The other is posted just as a slogan: The Super Voice Girl and the sponsor’s name, without any images of human beings represented.

Next, my attention will be laid on analyzing these advertisings, so that the information hidden behind the poster or the mask can be revealed. First, the first type of the call-for-participation poster or, the poster with a girl being presented, has three crucial elements or characteristics: Civilian-oriented feature; the attribute of youth, innocence and beauty; and the Mengniu’s product. Then what kind of information do they convey to people?

(1) Civilian-Oriented Features: The girl in the poster is not a super star or hot singer. The presence of her is to indicate that the Super Girl show is designed to meet the cultural needs of the civilian population or the general public and to fill up the aesthetic blank. The Super Girl contest as one of the cultural events that are of a strong sense of civilian discourse (民间话语或平民话语), which is incompatible with the elite culture, reflects that the general public in China today has an exuberant emotional demands for civilian idol and civilian culture.

(2) The Image of Youth, Innocence and Beauty: This image gives people the feeling of
affinity and approachability. It makes people feel like that you can see a girl next door gradually evolves into an idol and can see a civilian gradually becomes a hero that captures millions’ attentions. This image strongly targets four groups of people. First, those boys with favorable impressions and sentiments of adoration toward the opposite sex. This leads my discussion to the gender issue represented by the poster. There is no image of boys and young men showing up in the poster, boys and young men, however, are the main part that the Super Girl show is intended to target. Second, those girls with mentalities to compare and compete with those being of the same sex. Third, those elders with tendencies to care about and love girls or young people. The advertising shows a young girl with innocence and artlessness. From the elders’ point of view, she needs to be looked after to ensure her healthy growth. Forth, those older adults with preferences toward fashionable youth culture.

The second type of call-for-participation advertising, which has no image of human beings and sponsor’s product, looks quite simple. It just says “The 2005 Super Voice Girl.” However, this design is not to simplify the meaning of the Super Girl show, rather, it involves abundant information. The fact that there are no stars or well-known figures implies the meaning of authority has been restructured as follows: There are no so-called stars or idols being fixed prior to the contest by the authority, such as media and sponsor. The authority of interpreting the stars and idols has been given to the audience, the contestants and all the young people expressing concern to the Super Girl show. The audience will vote for their favorite contestant and create their own stars. The contestants
will shape the image of idols. This process of restructuring the idols’ image has also been displayed by the top-three advertising. If people put the second type of call-for-participation advertising and the top-three advertising together, they would see something interesting: The first poster is like an empty history, which means the image of idols is waiting to be built up by both audience and contestants, who, as identified early, are new authority. The second poster functions as a substantial history. Then how is it substantiated? Looking at the images in the top-three poster may help. First, the champion of the 2005 Super Girl contest, Li Yuchun (李宇春), who is in the middle, started the trend by getting noticed for her boyish looks and choice of songs by male singers, which stood out against the feminine styling of other contestants. She can capture attentions of those young people with tomboy style. As Zeng Zihang, a veteran media commentator and freelance writer suggests,

> From these shows, we can see that the traditional aesthetic view towards men and women has dramatically changed……The androgynous look—beauty featuring both mannish and girlish style—has unmistakably become trendy.\(^{11}\)

Sparked by the new idol Li Yuchun, the androgynous look is in among Chinese youth. Li’s success in her “handsome women style” signifies that the traditional gender norms and stereotypes are challenged among contemporary Chinese young women. The young generation’s definition of beauty is rebellious and different than the elders.

\(^{11}\) “Super Tomboy Style: Sparked by Super Girl, the androgynous look is in among Chinese youth.” *Beijing Review*, 21 September, 2006. p. 22.
Next, the runner-up of the show, Zhou Bichang (周笔畅), who is right to Li Yuchun in the poster, represents the school girl style. Third, the second runner-up, Zhang Liangying (张靓颖), who is on the left, has an image of gentlewoman. Though their images are not as rebellious and androgynous as that of Li Yuchun, they are quite popular among young people. This reveals the diversity of aesthetic taste of contemporary Chinese youth.12

What other information people can obtain from the top-three advertising? Like the logic of the discussion above, my attention will be paid to the cultural codes hidden in the poster. How would my paper decode the message from the poster? In particular, which elements are operating as signifiers (能指) and what concepts, signifieds (所指), can people apply to them?13

In this context the signifiers include three Super Girl contest winners, sunglasses, necklace, smile on the face, various magazines and purses with their images and so on. The signifieds are certain concepts associated with these fashion codes: Uniqueness, confidence, vigor and vitality. This coding converts the image of the Super Girls into signs, which can be read as a language. It yields a set of signs with a simple, literal message or meaning: Three winners of the Super Girls contest are showing themselves to the public (denotation, 直接意指).14 However, this image has a wider cultural meaning

12 “Super Girls: Still Center Stage.” Beijing Review, 21 September, 2006. Please refer to the file from the other attachment to have the top-three advertising picture.
14 Ibid.
(connotation, 含蓄意指).\textsuperscript{15} If people ask, “What is the Super Girl contest telling us by using this picture of the winners showing themselves and being shown on the magazines and other products?” My paper would suggest that people may come up with the following message: Having experienced hardships in the competitions, they become winners, civilian idols, idols selected by the general public, and elite created by pop culture. Their images have been replicated to magazines and other products, symbolizing the vitality and the influential power of popular and civilian culture.

In the Super Girl contest, the traditional way of interactive entertainment, which is singers’ performing on the stage and audience’s applauding and crying out with excitement, has been replaced by a new competitive style, Player Killing competitive system (PK), which is a one-on-one contest and only one of the two contestants can win out. The top three super girls, with no exception, have experienced the very intense PK contest. However, who can finally win out is no longer only dependent on the judgment from those so-called experts or stars, but on the viewers or the public, who can send cell phone message to vote for their favorite contestants. It is a democratic practice of the mass media, epitomizing that audience is respected and trusted. Moreover, it implies that the media is under the public supervision. At this point, an arena, on which the general public can participate in not only the contest, but also the judgment, has been established. Thus, for the viewers, the Super Girl contest provides an opportunity to get involved in the democratic process in terms of public entertainment.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
For the contestants, they have had intense and enthusiastic cheers from their relatives and friends and tears with mixed feelings. It does not imply a failure if they are eliminated from the PK. They may continue to have dreams of music, even though they leave the stage. Some of them will be disappointed and some will re-emerge, nonetheless, they have gained spiritual wealth: Courage and perseverance. This would be the contribution of the Super Girl show to the spiritual restructuring of Chinese youth.

What would the Super Girl show imply to the state? The significance of the show has gone beyond the culture itself. The contest, which is not simply the beauty pageant ritual, reflects the demand of Chinese youth and the society for equal opportunity and democratic life. Equally important, the show looks like a preliminary practice of democratic elections: It allows the viewers or the general public to vote and build their own idols and stars. Simultaneously, the Hunan Satellite TV Station functions as an agency to organize the show devotes effort to ensuring its transparency and fairness. All of them, which embody the elements that are fundamental to build the Civil Society in China, are enlightening the Chinese people.

**Industrial Foundation of the Super Girl Show**

This section will focus on introducing, firstly, elements forming the industrial chain of the Super Girl show; secondly, propaganda campaigns launched by the media and thirdly,
implication of the propaganda campaigns for the young audience. First of all, the girl holding Mengniu’s soft drink emphasizes the critical role of the Mengniu Corporation in the Super Girls contest; it is the sponsor of this show. The four groups of people cited above are becoming potential consumers of Mengniu’s products. It is worthwhile to make a deeper analysis of the enterprise culture associated with the industrial chain of the show. To be more specific, the discussion is to explore how and why the Super Girl show is related to enterprise culture.

Primarily, the industrial foundation of the Super Girl contest, which is to aim mainly at young women, is consistent with the marketing strategy set up by the Mengniu Corporation, which is to target mainly the young women as consumers of their yoghurt product. Thus Mengniu decided to sponsor the Super Girl program. They spent 28 million RMB (Chinese dollars) purchasing the right to title the Super Girl show and invested nearly 80 million RMB in the bus advertisings, outdoor billboards and advertisings on mass media, making the use of the growing influence of the Super Girls to portray Mengniu’s yoghourt.16 Interestingly, in 2005 the five divisions held the Super Girl contest, including Changsha, Zhengzhou, Hangzhou, Chengdu and Guangzhou, are exactly the regions that Mengniu intends to target for selling their products: Central China, eastern China, southern China and southwestern China. What is more, Zhang Hanyun (张含韵), the second runner-up in 2004 Super Girl contest, by her song sourness

and sweetness are my style (酸酸甜甜就是我) in a distinctive advertising, rendered Mengniu’s yoghurt more popular among Chinese youth. All of them reveal how the Super Girl show is associated with Mengniu’s marketing culture and strategy.

Next, the concern of this paper will be laid on another important agency of the economic industry chain related to the Super Girl show: The TV station, though there is no TV Station trademark presenting in the poster. How does the Super Girl contest relate to the enterprise culture of the Hunan Satellite TV Station? Put another way, how does the Hunan Satellite TV Station create the distinctive enterprise culture by introducing and promoting the Super Girl show? The emergence of the Super Girl show breaks the traditional way of production of TV programs, which is supply-side or one-way consumption. For a long time, China’s TV production and production management are merely to meet their broadcasting needs without carrying out efficient market development programs to take the viewers’ preference and enthusiasm into consideration. Through the Super Girl show the Hunan TV reconstructs the media enterprise culture, introducing a program that is of public participation and collective carnival. Instead of relying on super stars to please the public, the Super Girls program has depended on the general public to please the general public. Simultaneously, by this program the Hunan Satellite TV Station has been recognized as being of entertainment trend-setting status.

Then why is the Super Girls show associated with enterprise culture? Firstly, the Super Girl show has achieved a multi-winners market structure. The general public has

17 Ibid.
had the enjoyment of recreation product; the Hunan Satellite TV Station has gained a considerably high audience rating; the sponsor—Mengnin Corporation has made a powerful promotion of their products; the telecommunication operator has benefited from the cell phone messages used to vote for the show.

Secondly, it has become a crucial part in the industrial economic chain. The Mengniu Corporation is trying to convey such information as: Supporting the Super Girls is to support Mengniu and to support the idea that youth is wealth and should express themselves. It epitomizes the consumer culture associated with the Super Girl show in the sense that Mengniu is not only promoting a physical product, but also a spiritual good.

Thirdly, the Super Girl show creates a series of derivative products, including Super Girls-related toys, stationeries, books, magazines, jewelries, garments, audiovisual products and electronic products, all of which contribute to increasing the brand-related profits. This externalization of recreation product as extended reproduction has a wide space of market that is able to give rise to much larger surplus values than the Super Girl show itself can produce.

Second of all, Chinese mass media, as a crucial part of this industrial chain, implements a series of propaganda campaigns to promote the civilian shows. The discussion to follow will demonstrate the characteristics or strategies of Chinese mass media through propaganda of two media agencies—Hunan Satellite TV Station and China’s Central TV Station (CCTV)—of the Super Girl show and the Dream China show.

In 2004 China Central Television Station (CCTV) also launched a talent show
featuring not only selecting idols from the general public, but also audiences participation titled the Dream China (梦想中国), which is similar to the Super Girl show. One interpretation of CCTV’s involvement is that it is trying to take advantage of the Super Girl show. Simultaneously, it is worthwhile to note that the CCTV is a media representing the will of Chinese government.

Xu Shipi, an official of the government department that supervises culture, has pointed out, “it is the government’s responsibility to lead the ‘healthy development’ of popular culture in China and promote art performances that cater to the needs of audiences.”

This can be viewed as an official standard of products of Chinese cultural industry. Now the logic is clear: The emergence of the Dream China on the CCTV indicates that the Dream China show meets the criteria set by the government, so does the Super Girl show, given that they have some similarities ranging from mass election (海选) and civilian participation to voting by cell phone messages and fans’ craze.

In other words, the Super Girl show, as a representative of TV program that aims at selecting idols from the public, has been granted legitimacy from the government. They “lead the ‘healthy development’ of popular culture in China.” Xu has further contended, Super Girl is a new phenomenon. From the perspective of cultural development, the success of the Super Girl show reflects the right of the masses to decide what they like and what they do not like, and also changes audience participation in TV shows from passive to active.

Therefore, according to the interpretation of the government, the “harmony” of the Super

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19 Ibid.
Girl show is reflected in its promotion of art performances that cater to audiences’ needs to participate and in its respecting audiences’ aesthetic taste.

A key question still remains: Now that the two programs share many similar characteristics which are able to meet audiences’ aesthetic tastes, why does the CCTV, as a nation based mainstream media of the Chinese state, persist in establishing its own civilian show, regardless of the risk of being accused as plagiarizing the Super Girl show?

Firstly, now that this type of civilian show embodies the core value proposed by the Chinese state—harmony but not sameness, the CCTV, as the most influential Chinese mainstream media, has the responsibility to implement the propaganda. Through carrying out this civilian show, the CCTV is actually propagandizing the cultural policy set up by Chinese Communist Party—the idea of closing to reality, life and people (贴近实际、贴近生活、贴近群众), proposed by Chinese president Hu Jintao, which contributes to the establishment of an open system of the relations between art and masses that embodies the character of ideology of socialist art (社会主义文艺的意识形态性质). Therefore, quite obviously, the CCTV’s propaganda of the civilian show—Dream China—has an intense political significance. Perhaps this is the most fundamental difference between the Super Girl show and the Dream China. The Dream China show is more like an instrument of political propaganda.

Then it is necessary to explore how the Super Girl show and the Dream China show

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21 Ibid.
influence the audiences (受众). Put another way, in what ways the two shows realize the purpose to propagandize? What common characters do these two shows have in terms of mass communication of contemporary Chinese society? The discussion to follow will further investigate the main characteristics of the civilian shows in Chinese media.

Firstly, media resources are limited. To be more accurate, channels for propaganda are scarce. For example, the CCTV, which develops the Dream China show, is the only nation-based television station in China. The Hunan Satellite TV station, which hosts the Super Girl contest, is the only province based TV station in Hunan Province. Then why does this scarcity of media resources, at both national and provincial level, matter? It may lead to a limited channel for the general public to obtain information. Consequently, people are very likely to be affected by the media.

Secondly, intensity of propaganda is high. For instance, during the May 1st Labor-Day week in 2006, the CCTV made an intense live broadcast on the Dream China show, broadcasting the mass election nearly one hour per day from May 1st to May 7th. Invoking words from Li Yong, a quite famous talk show host in the CCTV, the Dream China show would carry out “a broadcasting schedule with a high intensiveness (地毯式轰炸播出计划),”22 which implies a highly intensive broadcasting plan. Even during the regular weeks, the broadcast is scheduled on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, each of which has a three hours live broadcast. Moreover, in October 2004, the Dream China broadcast had ever been scheduled for seven days continuously. The News Broadcast of the CCTV (新

22 http://plan.eexb.com/mtjy/a/ecxd.htm
闻联播), which functions as a crucial channel for the Chinese state to release news or, to be more accurate, for “propagandizing the voice of the [Chinese Communist] Party and the government,”\(^{23}\) has given publicity to the Dream China show. Similarly, the Super Girls show drafted out an intense broadcasting schedule during the long holidays. Equally important, their match schedules both last four to five months.

Thirdly, the repetition is intense. The implication of the notion of “repetition” has two layers. The first layer is that the show itself has been frequently rebroadcasted. For example, during the Labor-Day week in 2006 the Dream China show was rebroadcasted for three sessions everyday—early morning, noon and afternoon. Obviously, the CCTV hopes to effectively popularize the Dream China through such a strongly high density of repetition. The Super Girl show is rebroadcasted in weekends. The second layer is that there are many TV programs that are quite similar to the Super Girl show taking place. In other words, the format of the Super Girls has been duplicated. Chinese media have intensely repeated the broadcast of civilian show: Besides “The Dream China” launched by the CCTV, there are “My Style, My Show (我型我秀)” and “Come On! Good Men (加油！好男儿)” being launched by Shanghai-based Dragon TV.\(^ {24}\)

Fourthly, the media lays more weights on format, less on content. In this context the format refers to propaganda campaigns launched by the mass media. These campaigns mainly involve popularizing results of contests, contestants’ performances and styles and

\(^{23}\) http://baike.baidu.com/view/4647.htm: A Brief Introduction to the News Broadcast of the CCTV.

so on. Whereas the content implies some facts and figures associated with the contests. For example, the media would, by the propaganda campaigns, let people know that Li Yuchun was the champion of 2005 Super Girl show and her singing style was rather unique. This popularization is exactly what the format means. Nevertheless, those people knowing the result of contest and singers’ style may have little or no idea about certain specific facts and figures relating to the contest. For instance, they may not know, in the very final game of 2005 Super Girl contest, which song or songs Li Yuchun chose to sing, what her boyish style looked like or what her hair style and dressing style were and how many votes from cell phone messages she got exactly. Not surprisingly, the same situation would occur in the Dream China show, in which the CCTV lays more weights on the format and less on the content.

Furthermore, this worry about media’s biased reports has been verified by a survey conducted by a media research agency—CVSC-Sofres Media Research Center. When asked “do you know who the champion of 2006 Dream China show was,” more than 70% of the interviewees, mainly young people, knew the answer. However, when asked “what song did the champion (Xiong Rulin) sing in the final game,” only 23% of the interviewees knew the answer. Similarly, a survey on the Super Girl show also reveals that a vast majority of the interviewees knew that Li Yuchun was the champion of 2005 Super Girl show, nevertheless, very few knew in the final game which song Li Yuchun chose to sing, what her boyish style looked like or what her hair style and dressing style
were and how many votes from cell phone messages she got exactly.\textsuperscript{25}

As a matter of fact, the question that concerns about the notions of “format” and “content” in the survey can also be expressed as follows: In what ways do you know the final game of the Super Girls or the Dream China? Or how do you know Li Yuchun or Xiong Rulin?

But why are these questions significantly necessary to be discussed? There are two ways for the general public to know the information about the shows, the contestants, the final match, the number of votes and so on: One is from mass media, the other is from people’s empirical experiences. Another way to represent these two approaches is that one is media telling people what happens in the show, the other is people seeing what happens in the show with their own eyes. It is necessary to clarify these two notions. The former refers to the tendency that people’s judgments and opinions about the show are endowed or indoctrinated by media; these people have never watched the show on TV with their own eyes, so that they can not make their own judgments. The later implies that people have watched the show on TV or on site, so they can form their own judgments.

The survey cited in early discussion has explicitly exposed that most of the interviewees, comprised mainly by the fans of the Super Girl show and the Dream China show, know the information about the shows without seeing them with their own eyes on TV. In other words, most of them learn the shows through propaganda implemented by

\textsuperscript{25} http://www.csm.com.cn/business/b1.html
mass media rather than empirical evidence, the CCTV and the Hunan Satellite TV station.

Now it is safe to conclude that most of the audiences’ perception and understanding about the shows are dependent upon media. Chinese mass media is actually controlling public opinion and understanding about public events. This is why the questions about “format” and “content,” cited above, are worth studying: By investigating the notions of “format” and “content” and the four characteristics, this paper shows how Chinese mass media exerts influence or control over public opinion, in particular, those young people or fans’ opinion.

Professor Zhao Yuezhi in her *Media and Elusive Democracy in China* has made a penetrating observation on media system of the Chinese state:

Mass media is a key instrument for the [Communist] Party [of China] to implement the mass line—it reports on the people’s situations through a bottom up process, provides the raw material for policy making, and once a policy is made, it is promoted among the people.26

It is undeniable that the fundamental principles of this mass line, advocated by the CCP, should be of people’s right to gain access to information and of public participation in policy making process. The contemporary Chinese media system, however, is lacking these two elements. As Professor Zhao further points out,

Although there is some form of grassroots access to the media in the amateur correspondent system and a limited watchdog role in the notion of “criticism and self-criticism,” there is no concept of the people’s right to know. Nor is there a notion of an informed citizenry participating

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directly in policy making……

To summarize, the current Chinese media system dominates public opinion by very limited media resource with highly intensive reports on public events and by repeating the information about the events, all of which contribute to understanding the notion of “format.” Regardless of the titles, such as the Super Girl show launched by Hunan Satellite TV Station and the Dream China show aroused by CCTV, the four propagandist strategies of mass media with Chinese characteristics have manifested themselves.

How does the Chinese official propagandist material portray the Super Girl show? The image of the Super Girls has become an instrument for the Chinese state to portray national image. In the main lobby of Olympic Media and News Center, international news media has free access to official brochures issued by the Chinese government or, to be more accurate, by the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad (BOCOG), which provide a brief overview on contemporary Chinese culture. A brochure titled “Modern China (时尚中国)” adopts Li Yuchun’s picture and offers an introduction to her with nine languages, including Chinese, English, French, German, Russian, Japanese, Korean and so on.28

One of the chapters of this brochure titled “Leisure and Entertainment” introduces the most popular leisure and entertainment activities in China today, such as Kara OK, hanging out in bars, tourism and civilian shows on TV. It chose Li Yuchun as the

27 Ibid., p. 30.
representative of the TV civilian shows or grass-root shows, emphasizing that in recent two years, the grass-root shows have captured public attentions at both national and provincial levels. Moreover, these civilian shows provide people with talents and dreams with a stage to show themselves and creates legends of being famous overnight. In 2005, Li Yuchun became prominent due to her success in pursuing the champion of the Super Girl contest, promoted by the Hunan Satellite TV Station.\(^\text{29}\)

This event has given rise to a hot discussion on the Internet. A survey question has been posted on one of the CCTV’s forums: “Do you think that the Super Girls are qualified to be introduced and portrayed by the Olympic Media Center in such a way, in which nine languages are used?” There are three options for interviewees to choose: First, “Of course she qualifies since she is a representative of fashionable popular culture.” Second, “It is a tragedy that a star of a grass-root show is being highly praised like this.” Third, “It is hard to say.” Among the 4050 participants to this survey, 77.41% chose the first option, 20.59% the second and 2.00% the third.\(^\text{30}\)

Obviously, the majority of the participants regarded Li as an idol or mouthpiece of contemporary Chinese popular culture. However, again, some may wonder how many of the 77.41% of the 4050 people knew Li Yuchun and the Super Girl show by mass media,\(^\text{31}\) in other words, by watching the Super Girl contest with their own eyes, and how many of them had the first option as their choice on the basis of the information

\(^{29}\) Ibid.
\(^{30}\) Ibid.
\(^{31}\) Ibid.
derived from media propaganda. Despite the fact that there are no such statistics available to answer these questions, the survey conducted by CVSC-Sofres Media Research Center, as cited early, may help. In that survey minority of the interviewees knew Li and the Super Girls through watching the show on TV with their own eyes. Put another way, minority of the interviewees’ interpretation and understanding about the show are based on empirical experiences rather than media’s imposition.

Third of all, the paper will explore the implication of these media propaganda campaigns with Chinese characteristics for Chinese young audiences or young people. Professor Zhao Yuezhi’s comments on current Chinese media practice, as cited early, are enlightening—“There is no concept of the people’s right to know. Nor is there a notion of an informed citizenry participating directly in policy making” Through implementing the four strategies, the Chinese media has actually deprived of young people’s right to investigate the Super Girls or the Dream China by their own. In other words, the media is engaged in an expository way of propaganda rather than an open communication. Equally important, this expository propaganda is to interfere in Chinese youth’s free discussion about public cultural event. The Chinese state, therefore, still holds a negative attitude toward young people’s participation in discussing public affairs. The state authority is more accustomed to leading public opinion by media propaganda campaigns. To be more accurate, Chinese mass media is a detached part of the state rather than an independent agency of civil society. It indicates that the civil society of China is far from maturity and perfection.
Value Foundation of the Super Girl Show

It should be noticed that the reasons why the Super Girl show successfully captures the hearts and attentions of young people and others are not only in its providing youth with models of life and with principles of life—although lots of young people feel that the images shaped by the show is of a stronger sense of attraction and charm than their colleagues and friends and than those moral models set by the Chinese state—but also, more importantly, in its ability to meet the psychological needs of young people. These needs include the pursuit of ideals, the persistence of beliefs and the attitude toward success and failure. As a matter of fact, people can carry out an instrumental use of the culture of Super Girls. For example, what the rulers (处于控制地位的人) can gain from the show is how to effectively implement the rules and regulations. What those who do not have the discourse power (没有话语权的人) can obtain from the show is the opportunity to display their talent and have self-realization by the compliance with the rules. What those at the bottom of society or the ruled (处于社会下层的人或受控者) can learn from the show is the enthusiasm to persist inspired by the hope to be accepted and recognized.

However, this section will explore what the Chinese youth can learn from the Super Girl show. Put another way, it investigates the three values (价值观) endowed by the
Super Girls to Chinese youth—democratic aspiration, individual emancipation and equal participation.

**Democratic Aspiration (民主诉求)**

In the past the mass media and other means of propaganda have shaped so many models or idols, including seasonal moral idols, figures moving others, pacesetters, forerunners and top-notch people from all walks of life. In spite of the fact that these figures are very real—they are real characters in reality coming from ordinary people, hardly can they affect and move the general public or, to be more accurate, convince and persuade the public. The reasons are as follows: Firstly, in order to shape a typical character, mass media and propagandist agencies tend to abstract these figures from the general public. The words and deeds they have should have been what the ordinary people have, however, media and propagandist agencies let these words and deeds become the figures’ unique characteristic and value which distinguish them from the public. Secondly, this process of idolization is exactly the process of turning these figures that are from ordinary people, from ordinary human relations (人际关系) and from ordinary human ethics (人际伦理) into people who dedicate, people who sacrifice and even people who rescue others. Thus, this process, simultaneously, is the process of alienating, ignoring and belittling others. This entire process shows the values and order of cultural production.

With the difference than this cultural production process, the Super Girl show relies on
its democratic characters (民主特征) to deal with the contestants from ordinary people to capture public attentions. It has set up an idol of life, an individual that benefits others; it allows people to see the interrelated individuals from the ordinary people, to see individuals’ potential and dignity and to see a miracle that the girl next door becomes a star and idol produced by cultural industry coming true, rendering confidence, talent and passion that are held by the ordinary people sustainable among the spirits of the ordinary people. Equally important, it respects each contestants or individuals’ way of expression, in particular, it grants a right for the group of people—the general public or the civilians—that has no discourse power (话语权) to make voice and to speak out. The Super Girl show creates a positive example, which is of an important function of highlighting and praising those young people that concern the Super Girls and concern the quality of confidence, talent and passion raised from the show.

In spite of the fact that the viewers, mainly Chinese youth, can vote for their favorite singer through cell phone message and the results of the competition are not only determined by the professional singers as judges, it is necessary to be careful while discussing the democratic factors of the Super Girl show. The notion “aspiration for democratic society” is twofold. First of all, the Super Girl show is of democratic factors such as the public participation in voting for idols. However, it cannot be completely regarded as a practice of democratic election for the following reasons:

Firstly, the model of evaluation in the Super Girl show just reflects the power balance. The first round of election in the contest has been known as selection from millions of
people or mass selection (海选), in which experts or professional singers play a central role in evaluation and assessment. There are no any democratic factors in the first round selection. From the second round to the finals, there are three groups of force getting involved in the evaluation process. The first group is those professional judges. The second is the viewers or ordinary people who can vote for their favorite contestants by cell phone message. The third one is the public judges (大众评判). The difference between the professional judges and the public judges is that the former group is composed of professional singers, whereas the later consists of the Super girl’s contestants from the subdivisions. A Player Killing (PK) would take place between two selected contestants. One is the least favored singer by the viewers or the voters by cell phone messages, the other is the least favored by the professional judges. The group that can decide which contestant of the two to survive and to move up is the public judges.32

Obviously, none of the three groups can have the absolute power and can dominate the entire contest. Those voters by cell phone message and professional judges cannot exert influence on the result of PK stage, while those public judges cannot decide who would be put on the PK stage. Those contestants that are not favored by the judges may obtain a great support from the viewers, while those favored by the judges may be disliked by the public. This tripartite decision-making mechanism forms power balance. Moreover, the highest authority and the strongest power should be given to the viewers or the general public if it is titled the full implementation of democracy. Not surprisingly, this

devaluation, weakening, contempt and rejection of the power of the general public have become a shortcoming, for which those critics from Chinese academic circle make sharp fustigations and criticisms, which will be shown later.33

Secondly, viewers’ voting is irrational. The cell phone message voters do not need to face the question of how to deal with their own rights and interests, since their voting for the contestants would only determine the fate of those Super Girls. Put another way, their voting has nothing to do with their own interests and benefits, implying that the cell phone message voters do not have to devote rational thinking to deciding to whom they will vote. But if their thinking about voting is not rational, what are their incentives to vote? Hei Nan (黑楠), one of the Super Girls’ judges, has answered this question.

The fans [of the Super Girl show] are those who have the least concern about the songs. They only need to see their idols coming to sing on the stage. As long as their idols sing on the stage, no matter how well they perform, the fans will give cheers.34

His comment shows that viewers’ voting is totally based on their emotional preferences rather than consideration of their interests. Such kind of voting is a self-expression of personal feelings. But what is the potential hazard of the irrationality of general public? Put another way, why does this irrational voting matter? Later discussion will deal with this question.

Now the discussion will invite people to briefly reviewing how the Chinese academic circles interpret the implicative discourse associated with the notion of

33 Ibid., p. 15.
“democracy with Super Girls style (超女民主).” Professor Xu Jilin, holds a negative attitude towards the discourse of democracy raised from the Super Girl show and discussed ardently by the public. In his article or, to be more accurate, his proclamation Exposing the Legend of ‘Democracy in Super Girls’ Professor Xu made a brief review of the key elements of democracy from the perspective of political science and compared the political democracy with the democracy of Super Girls.

First, malformed Democratic Centralism

Democracy embodies not only public voting, but also the direct and final decision making power of public voting. Thus democracy is able to ensure the lofty of will of the people……In the PK stage the role of public voting is just one third, not having the final decision making power. The group that holds the core decision making power is those ambiguous public judges……[The nature of those public judges is] representative system with Chinese characteristics. The thirty five key public judges were selected by the organizers rather than the public……

Second, tyranny of the majority

According to Habermas’ classical discussion, the legitimacy of public decision making embodies not only public voting, but also free discussion of the general public. The only public discussion of the Super Girls is judges’ on-the-spot comments. In the first round the judges can express freely, but later, having faced the pressure from the viewers and fans, those judges only give praise to contestants. In the very final contest the judges were totally ignored and removed……It is……“tyranny of the majority” when the democracy disallows dissidents and criticisms and only allows cheers and praises……

Third, high cost of participating in democracy

The cost of voting for Super Girls is high. The cell phone message, which is just 0.1 yuan usually, has become 1 yuan when used to vote for Super Girls. Ostensibly Super Girls’ voting is equal [to everyone], it is actually money worship. Those poor people would have to take the cost of participating [in democratic decision making] into consideration……The invasion of money to


36 Ibid.
voting denigrates democratic spirit……\textsuperscript{37}

Professor Xu further suggests that

Besides [public] voting, the real democracy should include transparent procedure, equal right, free discussion, respecting dissidents and principle of fairness that is transcendent over all individual will. All of these are exactly what the Super Girl [show] is lacking. The so-called “democracy with Super Girls’ style” is just a populist democracy (民粹民主)……\textsuperscript{38}

As for the essence of populist democracy, Wu Jian (武堅), a scholar in contemporary Chinese culture and politics, has made an interpretation.

The difference between democracy and populism is: The former attempts to seek an optimal balance between officials (government) and civilians (society), whereas the later is inclined to unconditionally resorting to award by public opinion. Because of the actual existence of people’s limited rationality, people holding the adjudicative power are not able to independently exercise the power. [This power] is always seized by leaders with the ability to instigate……., implementing a populist reform in a society, in which people are lacking rationality and independent ability, will give rise to populist system changing into dictatorship and autarchy driven by “leaders.”\textsuperscript{39}

Wu’s comments have answered the question cited early: The hazard of civilians’ irrationality or lack of rationality is that civilians’ fanaticisms are easily utilized and deceived by dictators. The best shelter for this will of power is exactly the populist democracy.

However, Cui Weiping, professor of the Beijing Film Academy, as a representative of another school of thoughts, holds a positive evaluation about the democratic characters in the Super Girl contest. Her article \textit{Observing Democratic Form from the Perspective of}

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{39} Jian, Wu. \textit{Democracy or Populism—A Perspective of the Super Girl} (民主还是民粹？--从超女说开去)  
\url{http://www.tecn.cn/data/detail.php?id=14763}
Super Girl’s Democracy (从超女民主看民主的身段) contributes to a rehabilitation of democracy with Super Girl’s style. Professor Cui frankly demonstrates some biases aroused from Xu Jilin’s proclamation.

First of all, there is no lack of free discussion in the Super Girl show as Cui points out.

Professor Xu thinks that there is no free discussion in the Super Girl contest. In other words, it lacks deliberative democracy……[But then] I learn that there has been a great number of free and heated discussion and debate among those people participating in voting on some famous websites, including Sina.com.cn, Baidu.com and so on. Professor Xu’s claim in his article [“Exposing the Legend of ‘Democracy in Super Girls’”] that “the only public discussion of the Super Girls is judges’ on-the-spot comments” is due to his lack of familiarity with the Super Girls. The topics they discuss range from singing skills (such as Zhang Liangying’s special voice) to gender identity (such as Li Yuchun’s androgynous image)……  

Second, Professor Cui emphasizes that “populist democracy” and “tyranny of the majority” are not suitable for entertainment. She disagrees with Professor Xu’s point of view that the public opinion embodied in the Super Girl show is equivalent to “populist democracy” and “tyranny of the majority.”

The reason why we need for continued vigilance for these two is that they are of irrationality and violent tendency. The later is related to safeguarding people’s life and property, which is unrelated to an entertainment activity……Populist democracy, is mainly under the category of realist politics, involving formulating some policies and their corresponding consequences. It has no relation to entertainment. Those winners selected from the Super Girl contest neither hold any positions of government officials nor get involved in making public policies……  

Furthermore, Professor Cui contends that democracy is not the discourse that is exclusively used and discussed by elites.

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41 Ibid.
Democracy is a type of life style. In other words, it is not a lofty and great objective. For those who pursue democracy, it is an ideal. But it never means that democracy is whatever great, what’s more, it never means that only those great figures can pursue democracy. In this sense, democracy is not just a matter that only those elites concern, even more not a patent held by scholars who are expert in the theory of democracy......Democracy with Super Girl’s style is...... exactly entertainment democracy, which is not......realistic political democracy......

This paper, however, is neither to provide a value judgment as to which interpretation about Super Girl’s democracy is more reasonable, persuasive and insightful, nor to offer a middle route or a compromise plan, in order to try for a balance between the two schools of thought. In this section, the paper is intended to create an interpretation about the implication of the heated discussion of the democratic issue aroused from the Super Girls. The intense debate of contemporary Chinese scholars about the democratic issue generated from the Super Girl show has the following significances:

First of all, the relatively systematic and comprehensive explanations about the spirit and principle of democracy, derived from the debates among scholars and some ordinary people concerning democracy, promote the democratic enlightenment for contemporary Chinese youth. From Professor Xu Jilin’s statement that the Super Girl’s democracy is a democracy excluding dissidents and criticisms and is just a “populist democracy” and “tyranny of the majority” characterized by “democracy with cheers (欢呼式的民主), democracy with praises (赞美式的民主)......” to Professor Cui Weiping’s claim that the Super Girl show reflects a democratization of entertainment; from Wu Jian’s explanation

42 Ibid.
about the difference between political democracy and populist democracy to the enthusiastic argumentations about public participation among those Super Girl’s fans on the Internet, all the discussions have contributed to the improvements in young people’s understanding about the spirit of democracy. Although one might argue that not all the young audiences and voters concern about the ideas of democracy, democratization and democratic reforms, it should be noted that those participating in voting have, after all, experienced in person the referendum, which is the first step of a democratic process.

Secondly, the public voting and potential democratic factors aroused from the Super Girl show have attracted the attentions of Chinese elites. A question remains: Does this practice imply that contemporary Chinese intellectuals attempt to rely on the interpretation, discussion and debate about democratic issues aroused from cultural products to express their spiritual sustenance for political democracy? Despite the fact that the answer is not clear, it is affirmative that Chinese intellectuals do not abandon the thinking about and earnest attention to democracy. They are able to enlighten Chinese youth.

**Individual Emancipation (个性解放)**

The contestants are encouraged to show their individuality to take advantage in the competition. The contestants devote efforts to showing their uniqueness. Li Yuchun’s boyish style and choice of songs by male singers, stood out sharply against the feminine style of other contestants, had successfully sparked her fans. Her uniqueness can also be
found from her dancing and posture to hold the microphone while singing, which had been identified by her fans as her most handsome and charming moment. Unlike Li’s strategy to show her individuality by her performing style, Zhang Liangying, the third-place winner of the 2005 Super Girl contest, distinctively exhibited her individual character in her singing techniques, which had been perfectly displayed by her use of a special vocal skill—the voice generated from throat (海豚音) in singing “Loving You.”

From the perspective of the PK stage, exhibiting individual characteristics becomes a key factor that determines contestants’ fortune. There is no shortage of such examples. Wang Sujun, an old lady, resorting a revolutionary song “Jiang Jie (江姐),” marched to the final twenties in the Chengdu Division. Huang Xin, a singer with rather mediocre appearance and singing skill, always having a red tight-clothing and shouting herself hoarse, also moved up to the second round in the Chengdu Division. She has been comically described as the “Cardinal (红衣主教).” Ji Minjia’s national singing style (民族唱法) distinguished her from other contestants with popular singing style (通俗唱法), obtaining a good reputation from the judges and voters by cell phone message and moving up to the last fives……

These examples definitely reveal the show of individual characteristics ranges from the choice of songs, of singing styles and of singing techniques to the images, the postures and the arrangements of finery. All of them can be viewed as the denotation (直

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44 Ibid.
接意指), in Stuart Hall’s language. The wider social and cultural meaning, denoted as connotation (含蓄意指) by Hall, is that, firstly, they exhibit the appeal of those young contestants and audiences for the rules of social competition and the order of Chinese market economy. Chinese young people need a social mechanism that provides them with chances, in which they can distinguish themselves from others by actively making self-improvement, so that they are able to survive and develop.

Secondly, it reflects Chinese youth’s reaction to China’s labor market and employment pressure. Guoqi An, Deputy Director of China Youth and Children Research Center, has acutely pointed out the severe situation of contemporary China’s labor market.

According to statistics provided by Ministry of Labor and Social Security, the number of those unemployed and laid-off was about 14 million in 2004 that indicated an increase of 7.15% compared to 2003. In urban areas, newly added labor force reached around 10 million and total positions available in urban areas reached 24 million. Calculated from the basis of GDP growth rate of 7% to 8% and the employment elasticity of the current economic growth, China could only offer 5.6 to 7 million new positions nationwide that are far from meeting the demand of employment......

Not only does the challenge come from the “long-standing oversupply of labor force and shortage of available positions,” but also, there are conflicts between advanced technology and workers with low quality and between “diverse employment channels and workers’ employment misperceptions.” As Guoqi An has further exposed

Data from the Ministry of Personnel suggested......[in] 2005, the number of professional

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technical personnel will reach 54 million with an annual increase of 3 million......However, judged from the quality and makeup of the personnel, it is rather problematic. There are many lower level professionals, but fewer intermediate and advanced ones; there are many professionals in traditional industries, but fewer in high-tech professions......By the end of 2002, there were......only 3% of [Chinese work-age population] received college education and above. In recent years, the demand for various kinds of information technology professionals is over 2 million in China, however, the labor market can hardly meet a quarter of the demand......

[In] job seeking, some of the young unemployed workers show that they would ‘wait for opportunities, count on the government and ask for good pay’......[Some] of the unemployed youth......are not well prepared for competition in the market. Thus, they tend to reveal several common emotional reactions, such as confusion, blind self-confidence, pessimism, disappointment, extremism and complaint......[The] lack of professional skills and experiences are major impacts on unemployed youth in future employment and reemployment......

The connotation of An’s observations is that individual emancipation is Chinese youth’s strategy to react to the enormously unprecedented employment pressure. In this case, the notion “individual emancipation” has a broader implication. It is not merely referred to as the exotic costume, the optimize performance, the peculiar modeling, the unexpected choice of songs and so on, but the pursuit of knowledge, the craving of skills and the expectation of social adaptability. What behind these means to stand up to the employment pressure is the awakening of contemporary Chinese youth’s sense of responsibility. Specifically, it is the awakening of the sense of responsibility for themselves. Only in this way can their individual values be embodied, can their individual potentials be emancipated.

China has a “long-standing oversupply of labor force and shortage of available positions.” To gain opportunities to be employed, Chinese young people have to promote themselves in knowledge and skills. It is their responsibility to show their individualities

46 Ibid.
or advantages that can distinguish them from others. It implies that the quality of China’s labor force would get improved in the long term. It might be that in the long run, China’s industrial structure changes from labor-intensive oriented industry to skill-intensive oriented industry.

**Equal Participation (平等参与)**

The equal participation is threefold: Contestants’ equal participation, audiences’ equal participation and equal participation of civilian discourse in cultural event. Firstly, all the contestants are given equal opportunity to participate in the show. There are no selection criteria such as contestants’ social and economic status, educational background, and occupation and so on. One would claim that it does not provide an equal opportunity for men to participate, giving rise to a sexual discrimination. This paper, however, will argue that the exclusion of men from the contest exactly embodies women’s pursuit for equal opportunity to participation in society dominated by masculine discourse.

Secondly, audiences have equal opportunities to vote. This equality can be attributed to the use of cell phone messages, due to those messages’ success in hiding and ignoring voters’ social positions that might exert subtle influence on the results. Admittedly, as Professor Xu Jilin suggests, the cost of cell phone message for the Super Girl’s voting, which is 1 Chinese yuan, is as ten times as much the cost of regular cell phone message. Nevertheless, it should be noted that 1 Chinese dollar, not as much as 1 million or billion Chinese dollars, cannot be viewed as being able to distinguish the rich from the poor and
the elites from the general public. Put another way, people’s affordability of 1 dollar drives the participation in voting equal.

Thirdly, the civilian discourse obtains an equal opportunity to participate in cultural event. This equal participation leads people to consider the notion “cultural democracy,” which “underscores a celebration of popular culture, a rejection of the cultural elitism of Chinese intellectuals……”47 In the context of the Super Girl show, the rejection of the cultural elitism refers to a subversion of intellectual discourse about selecting, defining and interpreting idols. The top three singers won out in the finals have been generated from civilians’ voting rather than social elites’ judgments. In those young audiences’ minds, the ideal image of the Super Girl is defined as being androgynous, represented by Li Yuchun.

Then what does the principle of equal participation imply to contemporary Chinese youth? If the principle of individual emancipation discussed above underscores the internal factors of the Chinese youth being able to stand up to the employment pressure, then the notion of equal opportunity to participate is associated with the external factors related to the Chinese youth’s success in job-seeking and promotion of professional career. It should be noted that the individual emancipation aims at activating Chinese young people’s responsibility for their individual progresses and promotions in order to be employed, whereas the equal participation targets the Chinese state’s responsibility for

establishing a fairly competitive environment to ensure youth and young women’s employment and, much more importantly, Chinese women’s rights to equally participate in public affairs. This is, not surprisingly, the implication of the notion of “voice” for the Super Voice Girls; it is Chinese women’s voice striving for gender equality in terms of political participation. The following discussion will further investigate the implication of the notion of equal participation for contemporary Chinese women. That is, it is of a deeply practical significance to cherish women’s equal participation in political and public affairs in China.

The diagram to follow, adopted from a report titled The Conditions and Characteristics of Chinese Women’s Political Participation, shows the situation of Chinese women’s participation in political decision-making process, which explicitly indicates that Chinese women’s involvement in political power has been staying at a low level for about 50 years since the foundation of the National People’s Congress (NPC).

Moreover, numerous Chinese domestic women’s organizations have noticed that the difference between Chinese women’s participation rates in politics and the rates of the international society is enlarging. On the one hand, the proportion of female senator in National Congress of some other countries across the world is increasing, on the other hand, the proportion of female deputy in China is continuously declining, with regard to international ranking, from 12th in 1994 to 42nd in 2005, forming a big countermarch.
The Change of Gender Proportion of the Deputy to the National People’s Congress of China
(The 1st National People’s Congress in 1956—The 10th National People’s Congress in 2002)
(中国历届人大代表两性比例变化: 1956年第1届—2002年第10届)\(^{48}\)

Chinese women’s low political participation rate has become more manifest in the highest organ of state power. The closer the position to the highest officials is, the lower the participation rate of Chinese women in political power is. As the report demonstrates,

By the end of 2002, 13.20% of the deputies to the NPC Standing Committee are female and 11.7% of the members of the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference are female. However, there is no female member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Standing Committee and only 7% of the committee members of the Communist Party of China are female, including alternate committee members……\(^{49}\)

The facts and figures cited above indicate that promoting Chinese women’s equal opportunity of political participation is rather imperative. The principle of equal participation is, again, one of the major voices derived from the Super Voice Girl show.

Next, the paper will explore how this sharp voice—the voice actively appealing for Chinese women’s equality of political participation—functions. The feminist organizations start with concerning about social reality and state policy and finding


\(^{49}\) Ibid.
inequality of gender. And then female scholars will devote efforts to implementing theoretical analysis and providing policy-related proposals, which will be submitted to legislative and policy-making sectors through the deputies or members of the NPC or the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. Consequently, the current policy text will be adjusted. The organization of women’s democratic participation and promotion of policy adjustment involve a wide variety of policy-related fields, such as employment, education, health care, family and so on. It is safe to state that bringing the gender consciousness into policy-making process is becoming a strategic goal of the Chinese women’s organizations.

To be Specific, as the report further reveals, in the domain of education, several female teachers, from the department of education at the Normal University of Beijing, exposed profoundly the gender bias and gender stereotype manifested in various formats in not only the elementary and high school textbooks, but also the classroom teaching process. Their research, which had formed a policy proposal, had been submitted to the Ministry of Education via the State Council, which obtained the proposal from the All-China Women Federation (中华全国妇女联合会). The educational policy makers and the writers of textbooks were required to revise the textbook contents by adopting a principle of gender equality in elementary education. In July 2002, the Ministry of Education announced that the revised textbooks would avoid the occurrence of gender bias and stereotype and disseminate the idea of gender equality.  

50 Ibid.
In the domain of agriculture women’s participation in policy-making also plays a critical role. Some women’s organizations put forward suggestions to the State Council on protecting the land rights and interests of women in rural areas in distributing land contracts, which attracted attentions of high officials. In 2001, the State Council promulgated a regulation, providing a series of specific and practical policies to protect women’s rights and interests.

In the domain of familiar life, women’s organizations at provincial and municipal levels are engaged in appealing to the People’s Congress and judicatory departments for recognizing and preventing domestic violence. Thus, the domestic violence is converted to a legal and social problem, which finally becomes a policy-making issue. As a result, 16 provincial governments of China make legislations on preventing local domestic violence and more than 90 municipal governments constitute policies on protecting women’s rights in familiar life. In 2000 the *Marriage Law of the People’s Republic of China* (中华人民共和国婚姻法) was revised to include provisions of anti domestic violence. This is the first time that the prevention of domestic violence is legislated in modern Chinese history. Furthermore, the principle of gender equality has been included in the *Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Women’s Rights and Interests* (中华人民共和国妇女权益保障法).51 This principle, resulted from women’s movement of emancipation, on the basis of the participation with gender equality in public affairs, has become a basic national policy of the Chinese state aiming at

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51 Ibid.
optimizing the social environment of women’s development, which contributes to a harmonious development with gender equality, thereby helping to realize the objective set by Hu Jintao’s leadership—establishing a harmonious socialist society.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the marginalization of women’s participation in political decision-making and public affairs in China is an irrefutable fact. From 1995 to 2005 there are approximately 8.0% female high officials of civil servants and 13.2% female members of the NPC Standing Committee. In 2002 the proportion of female minister with chief position is 3.4%, while the proportion of female mayor with chief and deputy position, among 668 Chinese cities, is 8.8%, among which the proportion of female mayor with chief position is less than 1%. In addition, from the perspective of power position, female leaders are mainly arranged at low positions. For instance, the proportion of female administrative cadres with leading roles of ministries is only 8.3%, of departments is 11.7% and of divisions is 16.1%. Moreover, the majority of female cadres are at basic, non decision-making and subsidiary positions, such as labor unions, women’s federations and so on, all of which provide women with no power to make final decisions.52

The fact that high decision layer is dominated by male officials and there are no female officials in the core decision layer of the Chinese state leads to a difficulty in ensuring the formation of a top-down influential policy to protect women’s rights and interests. Therefore, Chinese women are still at a peripheral status with regard to power

52 Ibid.
relations. The marginalization of women’s rights has given rise to a fact that the policy-making people are not able to take women’s interests into consideration. Put another way, women’s voice is too weak to influence policy-making process. Their appeals to the decision-level for rights and interests have a little effect on policy and legislation. Therefore, to sum up, it is of a great practical significance to call for women’s equal participation in political and public affairs in China today.

**Ethical Foundation of the Super Girl Show**

Admittedly, even from a gender perspective, the Super Girl show is worth studying. What is the significance of the Super Girl contest to contemporary Chinese young women? The Super Girl reflects the process of constructing the discourse of power (权力话语) of young women of contemporary China, which includes social request (社会诉求) and rebellion and resistance to the patriarchal society (男权社会). This structuring has been shown in the Super Girl’s advertising symbol. In the top-three poster as shown early, Li Yuchun, the champion of 2005 contest, has a strong boyish style, which has successfully attracted viewers’ attentions. As a report by Liu Yunyun in *Beijing Review* reveals,

Li Yuchun……started the trend by getting noticed for her boyish looks and choice of songs by male singers, which stood out against the feminine styling of other contestants…… [Her] sense of style has become mainstream among the latest crop of wannabe stars. Chinese newspapers and magazines have been keen on discovering other tomboys and have called out to society that the
era of androgynous beauty has come.53

Indeed, it is a beautiful and charming androgynous image. The significance of this androgyny, however, is far more than its beauty and charm. The notion of “structuring discourse of power,” as cited early, has two facets.

Firstly, this image or advertising symbol underlines the social request of contemporary Chinese young women, which aims at the right to have equal opportunity. The androgynous image or the boyish looks convey such information as: The women should have had opportunity to participate in social and political decision-making and to choose careers that men have and so on. Furthermore, the request also targets at the right to speak out. In this context the right to speak out has been specified as the right to define beauty, charm and fashion. A report from the China Youth and Children Research Center (CYCRC) emphasizes that “the Super Girls are not beauties in a traditional Chinese sense. The young generation’s definition of beauty is rebellious and different from that of their elders.”54 The definition of beauty among young generation is, as Zeng Zihang, a veteran media commentator and freelance writer points out, “beauty featuring both mannish and girlish style.”55 This change in gender stereotype has been shown by Li Yuchun in the top-three advertising poster.

Secondly, the androgynous image signals that contemporary Chinese young women

55 Ibid.
challenge the authority of patriarchal society. The way that the fans of Li Yuchun glorify Li is to use the word “handsome (帅),” which should have been used for men. The emergence of “handsome girl” underlines the disintegration and deconstruction of the monopoly of patriarchal discourse (男权话语垄断). Some vocabularies are no longer exclusively belonging to men. Nonetheless, the cultural code behind this challenge to the monopoly of discourse or vocabulary is more complicated.

The androgynous image or neutral strategy (中性路线) adopted by Li Yuchun and Zhou Bichang indicates Super Girls’ contempt of men’s aesthetics. Why? Their neutral image is to capture attentions of female viewers rather than please males. It has proved that the majority of the fans of Li and Zhou are females, on account of the fact that Li and Zhou, especially Li Yuchun, underlined the characteristics that men have: Short hair, no skirts, boyish dressing and so on. No wonder that there is a Super Girl viewer making such comments as:

This [should be called] Super Boys rather than Super Girls……those moving up to the finals look like men!! Only [Zhang] Liangying and He Jie look like girl, all of others look like men, such as Li Yuchun, I have no idea as to why so many people like her! She is indeed powerful, but not suitable for participating in Super Girls……

Though it is impossible to confirm the gender of this viewer, it is undeniable that male audience may feel disappointed with the show, particularly with the finals, due to the fact that there are no beauties in terms of male aesthetics. The girl that attracts male viewers most is still Zhang Liangying, who has no boyish style and androgynous image. However,

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as the final result shows, she is just in the third place. Put another way, the contestant that meets men’s aesthetic standards is not the most popular and attractive girl of the show. There is a piece of comment becoming popular among the male viewers of Super Girl show: “Do not watch the Super Girl finals, if you want to see the beauties.”

The comments and discussions above reveal that women are no longer judged by men, but by women’s own aesthetic standards. It implies the aesthetic standards applied to judging women have divorced from patriarchal discourse and authority. Is this not Super Girls’ contempt of patriarchal society? Is this not the resistance of feminism to patriarchal power of discourse?

Then, are the cultural codes underlined by the Super Girl show consistent with the core values of contemporary Chinese society, which is “harmony (和谐)”? In other words, does the Super Girls’ cultural subversion deviate from the core ideology of contemporary Chinese society? It is necessary to have an interpretation about the notion “harmony” before going further to answer the questions.

Yu Guoming (喻国明), the associate dean of School of Communication of Chinese People’s University, has pointed out while asked to make comments on the Super Girl show:

I think that Chinese society is still of a lack of process of secularization. In the past our society was a so-called very elegant society. We simply pursued the highest ideals during the Cultural Revolution, everyone has to be saints. This was actually to shape all the people into one type, one value orientation and one cultural status. This was not a harmonious society should pursue. What a harmonious society should pursue should be the so-called harmony but not sameness. If the

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state insists on rendering different social conditions convergent, it is the greatest vilification to human nature, to appetite of human and to value of human. This is the most inhumane, the most immoral and the most counter-reactionary……

Professor Yu’s comments are twofold. First of all, he makes a sharp criticism on social homogeneity in terms of values, ideals and cultural mentality. Secondly, he introduces the concept “harmony.” It should be noted that the key point of Yu Guoming’s interpretation about “harmony” is harmony but not sameness (和而不同). Then, as a cultural product, is the Super Girl show of harmony but not sameness? The answer is positive. As the previous discussion exposes, the Super Girl show is not convergent to the gender stereotype, to the traditional aesthetic view towards women, to the definition of beauty in traditional Chinese sense and to the traditional evaluation method, in which the winners are selected by the authority and stars. All of them contribute to the uniqueness of the Super Girl show.

**Conclusion**

This paper interprets the industrial, value and ethical foundations of the Super Voice Girl show by decoding the advertisings and propaganda as a representative system. The three foundations constitute cultural codes of the show, by which the paper further investigates the significance of the foundations to contemporary Chinese youth.

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The significance embodies itself in three layers. Firstly, Chinese mass media, as a part of the industrial chain of the Super Girl show and, due to the immaturity of Chinese civil society, a detached part of the state, functions as an instrument to lead public opinion. This cramming method of guiding public opinion on the show deprives those young audiences of the right to be discussing. This lack of the space of public discussion, resulted from media’s detachment to the state, renders Chinese youth and, more broadly, Chinese people exclusive of public affairs and policy-making process.

Secondly, the debate among Chinese scholars about the democratic issues aroused from the Super Girl contest promotes the dissemination of democratic spirit and principle, such as the practice of public participation in voting, among Chinese youth. More importantly, this practice paves an even road for enlightening contemporary Chinese young people with the idea of participating in public affairs, forming a sharp contrast to the suppression, made by the state propaganda, about public free discussion. Simultaneously, the individual emancipation, manifested in the Super Girl show, is beneficial to Chinese youth to gain employment opportunity and to survive and strive in the competition of labor market. Equal participation reflects Chinese young women’s aspiration for participating in political decision-making, which will improve women’s social status.

Thirdly, the gender issue aroused from the Super Girl show is in women’s subverting patriarchy-dominated ethics, epitomizing the growth of the consciousness of feminism and the aspiration for gender equality. This awakening will contribute to improving the
social-economic status of Chinese young women.

**Epilogue**

Changzheng Yang’s discussion about popular culture among Chinese youth is of extensive contents, representing a wide variety of cultural products, trends and believes that has constantly come to vogue among contemporary Chinese youth. They include the phenomena of star fans in mass media, of chat fever in the virtual world, of the South Korean trend in foreign culture, of catchwords or pop idioms in social life and so on. It makes an overall review and summary about numerous popular cultural elements in the recent 10 years of China, such as “Xuecun fad,” “F4 fever,” nonsense movies by Stephen Chow, the depraved and narcissistic “hedonist” ideas represented by pretty female writers and so on. Yang further investigates the causes of popular culture among Chinese youth, including economic, social, cultural and psychological factors. This piece of work is an impressively significant survey on the popular culture of contemporary China.

However, it fails to focus particular attention on a particular cultural event or product. In other words, it does not investigate the approach to annotating the representative system of a cultural product.

The effort devoted by my paper to popular cultural studies is to explore how to

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interpret and deconstruct a particular cultural product or event, such as the Super Voice
Girl show. By doing this, this paper expects to enable people as well as the scholarship to
see the significance of the investigation of Super Girl show to the study of contemporary
Chinese culture and even Chinese society. The significance, as demonstrated in the paper,
is threefold. Firstly, the investigation establishes a linkage between the production and
consumption of popular culture and some hot or sensitive issues of China today,
including cultural democracy, political democracy, feminism, youth employment,
political rights of women and so on. Secondly, it takes a perspective on media culture, in
particular, on media propaganda with Chinese characteristics. Thirdly, it adopts the
perspective of cultural representations as an analytical tool, beginning with interpreting
the advertisings of the Super Girl show to explore the signifying cultural practices. All of
these can potentially make contribution to the scholarship about the studies of popular
culture of contemporary China.

Compared to Changzheng Yang’s approach to interpreting popular culture among
Chinese youth by emphasizing economic, social, cultural and psychological factors,
Nimrod Baranovitch’s explanation about popular culture in contemporary China is of a
fascinating look at the relationship between popular music of China and broad cultural,
social, and political contexts. In his China's New Voices: Popular Music, Ethnicity,
Gender, and Politics, 1978-1997, he pays a particular attention to rock and pop music
during the 1980s and 1990s, underlining new technologies and new economic system—
the market economy that have been accompanied by the emergence of rock and pop
music. In his point of view, the popular music emerged and developed with China’s reform and opening-up has enabled marginalized groups to obtain opportunities to make voice, which is independent of the control of the Chinese state. Therefore, in Baranovitch’s own words, “popular music culture is one of the largest and richest public spheres in China today.”

This piece of comment exactly describes the significant role of popular music culture as an indication of the growth of public sphere and civil society in China today. It provides my paper with a solid theoretical foundation or framework about the connection between popular music and state politics. In my thesis, this framework has manifested itself by the discussion of the cultural democracy, the political democracy, the feminist consciousness, and the political participation of women aroused from the Super Voice Girl show. All of them are associated with state politics and also gender, which is another fundamental context that Nimrod Baranovitch has discussed to analyze popular music as public voice.

Being similar to Baranovitch’s approach, Rey Chow’s work *Listening Otherwise, Music Miniaturized* from her book *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* also identifies the linkage between popular music culture and state politics. These two pieces are related to one another in the sense that Baranovitch’s work establishes a structure for the academia to understand the relationship.

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between popular music and political change. Chow’s chapter forms a case study that embodies and visualizes the structure.

It devotes effort to investigating the mainland China’s rock and roll singer—Cui Jian—as an important representative of contemporary Chinese popular music culture, whose songs “speak a different language of ‘oppressed’ emotions.” The expression of the subversive emotions by Cui Jian challenges China’s official music culture and thus antagonizes the Chinese state. Rey Chow approaches contemporary Chinese popular music culture with making a comparison between the connotation of Cui Jian’s songs and ideology of the official songs set by the state authority. This comparison enables people to get familiar with some crucial features of the music culture or industry. One is its subversion, represented by Cui Jian’s songs. The other is its obligation, reinforced by the Chinese state.

The similarity between Rey Chow’s piece and my research paper is that they both focus on a specific music cultural product or phenomenon. Thus, they both contribute to embodying and visualizing the structure established by Nimrod Baranovitch. The difference is my thesis attempts to interprets the particular music cultural product—the Super Girl show as a cultural representation, which functions as a cognitive foundation and thought leader for people to understand social change and state politics, rather than a cultural subversion.

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Andrew Jones’ *Like a Knife: Ideology and Genre in Contemporary Chinese Popular Music* makes a comprehensive study of Chinese popular music culture in a Western language. The book includes extensive interviews with singers, songwriters and critics, by which the author conducts cultural, sociological, musical, and textual analysis. Like Rey Chow’s explanation, Andrew Jones lays more stress on interpreting the burgeoning underground rock music subculture represented by Cui Jian and its subversion to the state-run popular music industry.

Cui Jian and his rock music, in Jones’ book, are annotated as an inevitable product of the cultural and political struggles between the Chinese state and China’s bourgeoisie civil society. There is a resonance between Jones’ work and my thesis, given that one of the attempts of my paper is to portray the Super Girl show as a platform that exhibits the status quo of the development and evolution of China’s civil society. How does this exhibition work? In my paper, the discussion of the aspirations for cultural and political democracy and for gender equality in the participation in political and public affairs reflects the fact that popular music can be used, as Nimrod Baranovitch contends, “to express and communicate different beliefs, aspirations, feelings, and identities……” Therefore, the popular music product, such as the Super Girls, becomes “one of the largest and richest public spheres in China today.”

Yuezhi Zhao’s book *Communication in China: Political Economy, Power and*

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63 Ibid.
Conflict investigates the evolution of economy and society of China today through a multifaceted and interdisciplinary study of China’s communication system. It takes a fascinating look at China’s communication industry in all its forms, including the news media, the Internet and the entertainment products, which has become an arena, on which various social forces perform and interact with one another.

This piece of work provides my thesis with a structure to study the role of communication and media system set by the Chinese state in controlling the society. To enrich the structure, my thesis interprets the Super Girl show as an agency to show how the state and its media and communication system exert control over the young audience and fans. The four characteristics summarized in my thesis are to reveal this process.
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