

Adapting *Idols*:
Authenticity, Identity and
Performance in a Global
Television Format

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Chapter 10
Fandom, Politics and the *Super Girl*
Contest in a Globalized China

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This is totally new to Chinese people. The whole thing is about singing whatever you want, and millions of young girls in those provinces have never had that chance before.

(Wei Feng, student from Beijing Foreign Languages Institute, cited in *China Daily* 30 August 2005)

Introduction

It was a warm summer evening in Beijing, August 2009. While we were having drinks at a bar, a Chinese friend suddenly jumped up. 'Help, I am going to miss *Super Girl* tonight!', he shouted. While walking back, we saw audiences glued to the screen in bars where they were showing that night's episode of *Super Girl*. Five years after its first edition, the show had apparently not lost any of its initial appeal for Chinese audiences. A year after its inception, the *Super Girl* contest, broadcast nationwide in 2005 by Hunan Satellite Television, succeeded in captivating a whole nation. Drawing on a premise similar to *Idols* and *The X Factor*, the Chinese *Super Girl* attracted a huge nationwide audience of 400 million people (Keane 2007). Viewers grabbed the opportunity to break away from the elite aesthetics and didactic content the state media offered. The opportunity to cast votes by SMS, a major innovation in China, contributed to its popularity. Both inside and outside China, this was read as a democratic act in a country that is notoriously hostile towards democratic procedures (Meng 2009). Apart from such a political reading, other readings pointed at how the 2005 winner of *Super Girl*, Li Yuchun, quickly became a gay icon in China due to her androgynous appearance (Yang 2009).

Above all, the story of *Super Girl* is a story about processes of globalization and the different possibilities of identification these processes facilitate. *Super Girl* is not only about a country opening up to the West, but also about a world that unfolds itself into and onto China – both indirectly and unwillingly as well as directly and willingly – driven by the desire to become part of a country with an alleged prosperous economic future. This chapter aims to unravel this story of globalization into five main threads, namely: technology, money, authenticity,

morality and democracy. We conceive of these threads as articulations of the different scapes that, according to Arjun Appadurai (2006), together constitute our contemporary globalized world: the technoscape (pointing to flows of technology); the financescape (flows of money); the ethnoscape (pointing to flows of people, in relation to *Super Girl* referring to performances of the authentic self connected to gender and sexuality) and the ideoscape (the proliferation of ideologies, here referring to the headings of morality and democracy). The show itself can be seen as part of the rapidly changing mediascape of China.

The threads we analyse in this chapter together constitute a symbolic toolbox with which different actors – most notably fans, potential stars, Chinese politicians, Chinese analysts and journalists, Western analysts and journalists and media corporations – identify or dis-identify themselves; they feed into a politics of positions that often reifies rather than challenges already existing ideological fault lines. In dissecting these different threads we will also show how a singular focus on production, text or reception is inadequate if we are to grasp the meaning of a show like *Super Girl*. Whereas some threads gravitate towards – but are not solely confined to – the production aspect (technology and money) and others to the star text (authenticity) and its reception (morality and democracy), it is our contention that they can only be studied in relation to one another. But let us first travel back to the year 2005, when *Super Girl* was first aired by Hunan TV and managed to enchant an entire nation.

Super Girl

The *Super Girl* contest is in essence based on the same premise as *Idols* and *The X Factor*. Voters are to choose their favourite from a short list of competitors on the basis of singing, dancing, appearance or other qualities, depending on the focus of the show. The Shanghai media company Tianyu ‘owns’ the show (P. Zhou 2005), but the show itself is not a licensed version of the global *Idols* format (Keane 2007). It was the first commercially sponsored reality television show in the nation. The Mengniu [Mongolian Cow] Dairy Company was looking for a new face to advertise its products and at the same time to tap into the fast-growing youth market. The company spent 14 million Chinese Yuan (RMB) (approximately €1.5 million) to get exclusive naming sponsorship rights, 15 seconds of advertising per programme and many other promotional opportunities. As a result, the company, to its satisfaction, almost tripled its sales of Mengniu yoghurt in the first half of 2005 (P. Zhou 2005). Hunan TV had already made quite a name for itself with innovative approaches to the medium of television that can be summarized as creating zany, off-beat and even risqué entertainment programmes (Fung 2008). Hunan TV ranks third in terms of national viewers’ share, closely following CCTV (China Central Television) and the Shanghai Media Group (SMG).

The talents competing for the title of *Super Girl* were pre-selected during open regional competitions. In the process, over 150,000 female contestants between

the ages of four and 89, from five provinces (Hunan, Sichuan, Guangdong, Henan and Zhejiang) were given 30 seconds in five rounds of regional competitions, selections of which were broadcast weekly, starting in March 2005.¹ The preliminaries resulted in 15 finalists participating in the national contest. From these, three contenders finally emerged for the title of *Super Girl*: Zhang Liangying (1,353,906 votes), Zhou Bichang (3,270,840 votes) and Li Yuchun (3,528,308 votes) (Wikipedia 2009). ‘Professional’ judges represented the popular vote. In the 2005 competition, there were four judges from the entertainment industry. Like their Western counterparts, the judges are ‘strong personalities, are often rude, and refrain from expressing emotions’ (Keane 2007, 122). In 2005, the judges were supplemented by 31 judges drawn from the ranks of ‘the common people’, a change read by Keane (2007) as a sign of localization of the format.

Many people wondered why Li Yuchun won the competition in the end. After all, the androgynous girl who called herself a tomboy was said to be the one with the weakest voice of the top five remaining candidates. But she did make an indelible impression on the viewers. Appearing without make-up, sporting a spiky David Bowie-haircut, dressed merely in jeans and a t-shirt and with a brazen look in her eyes, Li limited herself to a repertoire of songs that had been composed originally for male performers. The rise to fame also took her off-guard, as she explains in an interview:

I didn’t go into it with a clear head. I just thought I was participating in a singing contest. Each part of the contest followed in quick succession, so there was no time to think about it. ... Finally, I realized a lot had changed. But I couldn’t go back to my original life. It was all sort of dizzying. (Kuhn 2008)

Technology

The story of *Super Girl* is also a story about the possibilities of (new) technologies. Satellite technology has helped a provincial channel to reach a national audience, hence circumventing the hegemony of CCTV that was, until then, uncontested. Hunan TV not only became a strong competitor for CCTV, it also altered the Chinese media landscape, in which competition used to be avoided or limited due to Party regulations. New technologies enabled more interactivity, involving the audiences in the outcome of the show. Both Internet fan sites and message boards devoted to the competition facilitated the high level of audience participation. The most striking technological innovation was SMS technology, giving viewers the opportunity to actually cast votes and express their preferences. Even though the term ‘vote’ was considered to be too provocative and the less dangerous phrase ‘message of support’ was preferred, this can be perceived as a major innovation

¹ For the 2009 edition, pre-selection rounds were implemented in six different cities in China.

in the Chinese media scene, taking the process of two-way communications that started with the phone-ins of the 1980s to a completely new level, from the perspective of both technology and content (Joffe-Walt, 7 October 2005).

To read the success of *Super Girl* as being caused by new technological developments runs the danger of retreating to a utopian technological determinism. The increased marketization of the media industry, partly facilitated by technologies such as the satellite and the Internet, is part and parcel of the government-initiated policies to reform the media in China. In other words, the opening up of the media does not imply a retreat of the state (Fung 2008). The same is true for the emergence of new technologies: the possibilities of interactivity are not only controlled by the nation-state, which blocks sites the moment they become too (politically) sensitive; they also allow for increased surveillance of the citizenry. Neither marketization of the media nor digitization takes place outside the apparatus of the nation-state. Consequently, the potential for change that they hold is closely monitored by the state.

Money

Hunan TV's satellite link enabled it to reach all, if not most, of China's viewing audience: some 400 million Chinese watched the finale on 26 August 2005. In some areas where viewers failed to receive the programme protests were reported (Jakes, 3 October 2005; de Baan 2006). More importantly, however, the show's popularity was reflected in the advertising rates. The price for a 15-second commercial on the programme was as high as 75,000 RMB (approximately €7,500), rising to 112,500 RMB for an ad broadcast during the finale. Total advertising revenues for the finale, which carried 30 minutes of commercial messages, were calculated to be in excess of 2.4 million RMB (Lu 2005; P. Zhou 2005).

As noted earlier, the marketization of a show like *Super Girl* does not attest to a retreat of the nation-state or the waning of its power. Over the 1990s, the state has become deeply implicated in the profoundly intertwined processes of commercialization and transnationalization. 'The people' are gradually turned into 'consumer-citizens'. Up to today, in the midst of the maelstrom of global capitalism, the Chinese state holds a firm grip on – or better: is part and parcel of – the media industry. What has emerged in the past two decades is a state-global media complex (Fung 2006). The post-socialist state has, through its complicitous coexistence with the market, 'rejuvenated its capacity ... to affect the agenda of popular culture, especially at the discursive level' (Wang 2001, 71). Furthermore, like its Western counterparts, the reality format itself raises important questions about the value of labour in the media industry. Li Yuchun's remark quoted earlier ('I didn't go into it with a clear head. I just thought I was participating in a singing contest') is telling for the logic behind these shows: contestants are performing free of charge on prime time television. Their participation can be perceived as a form of free labour through which the media company generates income. For the media

industry, the reality format reduces above-the-line costs to a strict minimum. The notion of immaterial labour is useful to describe the logic of the production of reality television such as *Super Girl*. This is a kind of labour that is 'usually not recognized as "work" as such, because it concerns activities that are not associated with the traditional sphere of production' (de Kloet and Teurlings 2008, 350). *Super Girl* contestants provide labour that is simultaneously 'voluntary given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited' (Terranova 2000, 34). Immaterial labour is increasingly prevalent in our contemporary world, and China forms no exception. What is generally considered as fun, leisure and cultural activity very often constitutes free labour based on which different parties generate capital. The subsequent labour of audiences, whose voting for favourite candidates not only brings in direct revenues for the show but also helps to further create the hype around it, provides yet another example of the importance of immaterial labour (Meng 2009).

Authenticity

The performance of the authentic self is the crux of reality formats. In the case of Li Yuchun, her authenticity was built upon specific articulations of gender and sexuality. Her masculine image undermined stereotypical ideas about female stardom and opened up a discourse on homosexuality. Li's carefully crafted image in itself caused a flurry of discussions, both on the Internet and via SMS. These discussions dealt with questions regarding Li's gender identity and sexual preference, not only based on her image (boyish, short hair) but also on her chosen stage name: Chris Lee. Many of Li's fans argued that 'her appearance fits the cartoon images beloved by younger generations', that Li was merely following a fashion trend that was already popular in Japan and that this trend could be copied in China as well. Others insisted that 'lacking male contestants, women voters are naturally drawn to the most "male-looking" candidate', thereby unwittingly casting negative aspersions on Li's many female fans (R. Zhou, 27 August 2005).

It seems more likely that the voting audience grasped the opportunity to express its own ideas about what it saw as 'star quality', thereby delivering a critical message to the image makers who had been responsible for the appearance of other instant celebrities in the Chinese media until then. In other words, Li Yuchun was anything but 'the warbling coquettes, husky crooners and jolly fellows in brass stars and epaulets belting out odes to red flags' (Jakes, 3 October 2005). Her authenticity is grounded in a refusal to package herself into the familiar star idiom, thus carving out a space that seems more unique. In the words of one report:

She didn't have the voice nor the looks back then, just a love of music shrouded on the outside by a quiet, friendly, and always firm composure. This was what gained her fans and inspired. She gave people a success story that was based on neither the superficial appearance nor the talent that some are lucky to be born with. It was based on just her... her will to do what she loved. (Cfensi 2009)

Rather than being the flamboyant star, Li Yuchun performs the role of the girl- (or boy-) next-door type, in casual clothes (never a skirt or dress), acting as an average university student. Born in the 1980s, Li is part of the single-child generation. As she claims:

Most of us have no brothers or sisters. So our individuality is very evident. We have lots of confidence, but also a lot of uneasiness. The confidence is because we're independent, extroverted and self-centered. I can't put my finger on what the uneasiness comes from, but I often feel it. (Kuhn 2008)

It is this mix of confidence and puzzlement, a mix that is mapped onto gender and sexuality, that helps her to build an authentic self. As one reporter puts it: '[S]he is outgoing, boyish, confident. She is neither submissive nor quiet. It is precisely her proud and unpolished imperfection that has charmed her fans' (Joffe-Walt, 7 October 2005).

Gender and sexuality constitute key sites for the performance of the alleged authentic self. The gendered dimension of the *Super Girl* contest, but also of its sequels such as the *Super Boy* contest, is important in order to understand its appeal. Spaces to experiment with gender roles are limited in China (Rofel 2007). Despite China's rapid modernization during the past decades, gender roles have remained fixed and impose a rigid package of expectations that parents and society at large impose upon youngsters. The obligation to marry and have children looms large in the daily lives of Chinese youth. Women continue to carry the burden of becoming a good wife and mother as well as daughter-in-law. *Super Girl* offers an experimental playground for gender and sexuality in a society where spaces to play are rather limited. In a way, the show can be read as a desiring machine, in which both contestants and audiences experiment in a relatively safe mediated zone with different gendered and sexed selves. Li Yuchun's refusal to dress like a 'normal Chinese girl' is appreciated by audiences; it is read as a sign of her independence and authenticity. The ambiguity surrounding her sexuality only adds to her authenticity and attraction. Yet, as we will show later, when the thin line between ambivalence and overt sexuality is crossed, symbolic work is needed to reclaim the ambivalent authentic self.

This discourse of authenticity resonates closely with a globalized discourse of what constitutes the authentic self. It clearly shows how worn-out Orientalist oppositions between the West as individualistic and the East as collectivist have become truly a fiction (which they always were in the first place). What counts in our highly globalized society of today are authentic performances of the self, and media are considered to be an indispensable platform to achieve that goal. In the words of a Chinese expert: 'In today's increasingly diverse and tolerant world, ego becomes a symbol of one's existence, and *Super Girl* is a platform that gives full play to the range of personalities of the contestants' (Lu 2005). As such, *Super Girl* and similar shows merely attest to the importance of the self in late-modern society, a self that constantly has to be constructed and negotiated, as if it were a

statue that is always in the making, never finished (Giddens 1991). And, as Meng (2009, 266) argues, in *Super Girl* 'public surveillance and self-disclosure worked together to construct a "true self" that proves highly profitable on the market'.

Morality

Such mediated performances of the authentic self generated heated debates in China. As can be expected, the gender politics described above stirred up heated moral debates with regard to gay and transgender rights, topics that until today remain highly sensitive in China. While Li Yuchun's boyish image helped to construct an authentic self, the subsequent rumours on her sexuality also forced her to distance herself publicly from the label 'lesbian'. A few days before the final, pictures appeared on the Internet showing two girls cuddling and kissing each other, with one looking very much like Li Yuchun. Mainstream media quickly and fiercely condemned Li Yuchun's alleged act of lesbianism. 'As gossip circulated in cyberspace, Li Yuchun finally made a public speech declaring that the photos had nothing to do with her and all she wanted to be was her original true self (*zuo wo ziji*)' (Meng 2009, 264). In such discourses, gender experiments are considered incompatible with 'traditional Chinese culture'. Zhang Junyu, writing for China.org.cn, accused Hunan Satellite TV of hyping Liu to boost ratings: 'This program is using the mass media to spread unhealthy values to the public' (cited in Wu, 11 May 2010). This quote indicates that the moral panic surrounding the talent shows of Hunan TV is not only geared toward gender politics, but involves debates on the value or danger of entertainment and popular culture itself. The numerous reports on *Super Girl* gradually moved out of the entertainment supplements to the sections devoted to social events. By and large, opinion leaders and politicians were taken aback by the immense popularity of the programme. They felt revulsion that 'the masses of the people' were fascinated by the competition, and deplored its vulgar character, crass commercialism and complete lack of any educational or other redeeming qualities (R. Zhou, 27 August 2005).

One of the most vocal critics, and probably the most authoritative, was Liu Zhongde, former deputy-director of the Central Propaganda Department (1990–1998) and former Minister of Culture (1992–1998), then a Chinese People's Political Consultative Committee (CPPCC) Standing Committee member and director of the CPPCC Science, Education, Culture, Health and Sport Commission. During an interview in April 2006, he insisted that the *Super Girl* audience suffered from a distorted mentality, and failed to identify 'the flies and mosquitoes coming in through the Open Door' (Peng, 25 April 2006), leading to a contamination, or even poisoning, of the nation's youth. Moreover, Liu, himself a composer of Chinese operas, considered entertainment of this type as a disgrace for what he saw as art.

As was to be expected, his criticisms were not taken kindly by the *Super Girl* fans. He did not object to *Super Girl* as such, however, nor did he object to the show because a commercial television station broadcast it. After all, he included

the CCTV *Super Girl*-clone *Dreams of China* in his broadside. It was the alleged vulgar character of shows such as *Super Girl* that he deplored (Zhao 2006). Not surprisingly, CCTV anchors also critiqued the show; the popular quiz master Li Yong, for example, saw *Super Girl* as a 'pure commercialized operation', and claimed that CCTV 'would never use low taste gimmicks as selling points'. An official statement from CCTV described the show as 'vulgar and manipulative' (Meng 2009, 261). Other criticisms could be heard from the circles of established performers. These revolved around the manipulative aspects of this type of knock-out shows: aspiring performers without a shred of talent or artistic training could become instant idols, thrust into the public limelight and showered with numerous commercial rewards, a situation that used to be the exclusive right of powerful politicians, movie stars and top athletes, and all this by simply by catching the subjective eye of judges or viewers (Gu, 12 October 2005).

At the same time, however, the huge popular response actually showed that the public grabbed the opportunities this show offered to break away from the didactic content the state media usually provided. This can be read as a political act, showing a resentment towards the state broadcaster (Meng 2009). Yet, as noted earlier, Hunan TV itself can be seen as the outcome of the media policies of the nation-state, and as such is equally embedded in existing political structures. *Super Girl's* success made it abundantly clear that the 'elite aesthetics that have dominated the entertainment business' (R. Zhou, 27 August 2005) for such a long time no longer appealed to the viewers who jumped at the chance to watch a programme that they actually enjoyed. According to sociologist Li Yinhe, '*Super Girl* presents a victory of the grass-roots culture over the elite culture' (cited in Marquand 2005).

Democracy

The fact that Chinese living on the Mainland could actually cast a vote that would have an effect, if only for a contestant in a TV show, ignited a huge discussion in many circles, both at home and abroad, about the imminent arrival of some form of democracy. Many of the discussants considered it as proof of a society that was 'opening up' politically and pointed out that it would have implications for wider democratic processes that undoubtedly would follow. In their opinion, what initially started with a popular show would cast its influence on the show business that politics is, even in China. Others were less convinced, and insisted that SMS-voting or switching channels is about opting for what gives the most enjoyment and nothing more. After all, they argued, casting a ballot for a contestant in a TV show should be considered as a form of 'cultural democracy' that still does not enable people to vote on their own government. However, even these pessimists had to concede that it did give people the idea that their opinion actually counted, maybe even for the first time. Indeed, only a relatively small percentage of the total audience of *Super Girl* did cast a vote and the voting came with heated debates on assumed fraudulent practices (similar to debates about voting in the

Pan-Arab *Superstar* discussed in the chapter by Mary Ghattas). Even so, the democratic effects of allowing people to vote for a performing favourite should not be overestimated. As Jaron Lanier (2006) argues, even in the US:

More people appear to vote in this pop competition [*American Idol*] than in presidential elections, and one reason for this is the instant convenience of information technology. The collective can vote by phone or by texting, and some vote more than once. The collective is flattered and it responds. The winners are likable, almost by definition.

In other words, casting a vote in a reality TV show is no marker for the democratic sentiments existing in a nation.

Super Girl also led to the formation of numerous fan-based communities supporting the different candidates. Fans as such were not altogether new in modernizing China. The Taiwanese boy band F4 had already given the authorities and riot police an idea of what youth power could do during their very short visit to Shanghai in 2002 (Pomfret, 29 January 2002). It also gave the word for vermicelli (*fensi*) a new meaning in the Chinese vocabulary, namely that of 'fans'. The *Super Girl* fan groups, usually girls, were nicknamed after their favourite. Li Yuchun's followers called themselves 'corn' (*yumi*), Zhou Bichang's posse styled itself as 'chalk' (*fenbi*) and Zhang Liangying's fans were called 'bean jelly' (*liangfen*). The corns organized themselves into eight geographic bases, including an 'overseas Corn base'. Every base had a webmaster and a couple of corn leaders to organize voting campaigns and fan parties. Meetings were called on Baidu.com or qq.com, popular chat sites in China. The competing 'Bean Jelly Army Regiment' organized operations along the lines of a government divided into five ministries: propaganda, finance, planning, live broadcast site and organizational surveillance (Tang, 3 September 2005). Their employment of a governmental structure brings to mind the subcultural politics of style as described by Hebdige (1979) in which symbols from dominant culture are appropriated, but the question remains whether this indeed challenges hegemony. The appearance of these booster groups may create a framework for a more diverse society, in particular given the fact that the Chinese Communist Party, fearing disorder, does not look kindly upon the formation of such 'spontaneous' grass-roots organizations. As Van Zoonen hypothesizes in her treatment of the workings of fan communities in the Western political domain: 'in fan communities then, important capacities and conditions for democracy would be seen to arise and mature' (2004, 46). This position resonates not only with Jenkins's (2006) work on fans, but also with the earlier quoted study of Yang (2009), in which the agency of fans is celebrated and perceived to be a potentially important social force. Such a celebration not only fails to problematize the immaterial labour performed by fans, it also runs the danger of ignoring the power games that take place within fan communities. Furthermore, the fan-sociability produced by *Super Girl* remains of a highly apolitical nature, to be politicized only at those moments when the Party voices a critique on the show and the fans

unite to defend their star. Finally, in the words of Meng (2009, 269): '[A]s long as institutionalized channels for civic engagement and political participation remain tightly controlled in China, the rather misplaced enthusiasm on the democratic implications of *Super Girl* is an indication of how far China is from democracy rather than of how close it has come to'.

Amplifications and Disjunctures

Super Girl is ridden with ambiguities. While Western observers are keen to read it as a sign of democratization, Chinese officials condemn the show on moral grounds, whereas intellectuals criticize the alleged shallowness of the entertainment industry. Questions such as: 'Why her?'; 'Is this another American attempt to denigrate and ridicule China?' and 'Why can only entertainers and athletes emerge from the Chinese people?', were hotly debated on the Internet. The fans themselves constitute a contradictory site: while their agency may hold the potential for social change, although it remains opaque to define the nature of that change, their immaterial labour at the same time serves the entertainment industry to further capitalize on the *Super Girl* hype. The production of the authentic self propagated by the show is deeply embedded in neo-liberal fantasies about self-fulfilment that are often intricately linked to consumerism. It is part and parcel of a model of human nature, strongly promoted by the nation-state-media industry nexus, that has, in Rofel's view, the desiring subject as its core: 'the individual who operates through sexual, material, and affective self-interest' (2007, 3).

The state keeps a clear grip on processes of marketization and individualization. While it promotes increased competition between broadcasters and thus welcomes entertainment shows in general, it is quick to respond to potential dangers such shows may hold, either by censoring them or by changing the rules. In response to the 2005 show, the authorities indeed made the rules stricter. For the 2009 show, scandals about the judging panel members and the girls were to be avoided, the behaviour of the girls needed to be monitored, crying-together scenes were not allowed, the show could not be broadcast in prime time, it had to be finished before the end of the summer holidays and voting through the Internet or text messaging was no longer allowed. Through such regulations, the authorities aimed to limit the hype that followed in the wake of *Super Girl* while avoiding a complete ban that would not only cause public unrest and global disapproval, but also jeopardize their own policies towards media commercialization.

Super Girl is part of the rapidly changing mediascape of China, a scape in which global capital and global, regional and local media industries as well as the nation-state are intimately working together. We consider technology, money, authenticity, morality and democracy as the key components of this show, elements that ought to be studied in relation to each other. Inclusion of these components helps to move beyond the traditional communication model that separates production from text and audience. At times, these components help to amplify

the importance attached to *Super Girl*: her gendered performance of authenticity produces a large fan base which helps to generate money for the media industry, stirring up heated moral debates and opening up an avenue of hope concerning the democratic possibilities the show entails. But alongside these amplifications, we can also see the growing disjunctures. Western observers are eager to point at the democratic implications of the show, hence once again reifying the position that China, in order to become a global power, ought to transform into a democratic society. The references in media reports to the queer image of Li Yuchun can be read in a similar light: sexual openness is deemed important for a modernizing society. Li Yuchun shows that the format offers an experimental playground for gender and sexuality in a society that allows limited space for such play. Such national mediations of new gender roles present a disjuncture with the ideologies as promoted by the nation-state. Consequently, the nation-state, probably also in response to the global discourse that proliferated around *Super Girl*, temporarily retreated to the safe and familiar grounds of censorship and stringent regulations and condemnation of its 'low' character. Interestingly, cultural critics joined their ranks in attacking the show for its gross commercialization, reading it as a sign of consumerist times. Such tensions and disjunctures reify rather than challenge the ideological fault-lines that exist between the different groups: Western journalists repeat their mantra of democracy and openness; the Chinese officials theirs on harmony and spiritual values; the elite critics emphasize the lowness of popular culture; while the fans focus on the pleasurable appropriation of their star.

To critique fan activities for being irrelevant and hysterical is as naïve as celebrating these activities as the sign of a new and open China. *Super Girl* alerts us to Stuart Hall's (1980) assertion that popular culture is above all a terrain of contestation in which different parties defend their ideological position. There is little reason to see the show as a rupture, as a moment in which these positionings are challenged. On the contrary, the show is used to reify positions. *Super Girl* is deeply embedded in the complex and profoundly globalized nation-state and media industry nexus and is strengthening rather than challenging the status-quo. An analysis of *Super Girl* may help us grasp the complexities, contradictions and ambiguities of the multiple links between popular culture, the media industry and state politics in a globalized twenty-first-century China, but to read it as a platform for social change seems both naively utopian and simply inadequate.

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