People’s hero vs. Ms. Lane Crawford

Populist and petit-bourgeois manifestations in Chinese popular culture

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Abstract

Super Girl, China’s first reality television show produced the first two audience-voted stars in 2005 and 2006, at the time the show drew intensive attentions for its voting mechanism and democratic potentials. More than five years have passed, but neither of the two champions’ marketing strategies had met the political expectation for their democratic potentials in the previous discussions. By a closer examining of their marketing packages, we find that the two champions present two manifestations of the contemporary popular culture in China. To understand the complexity of popular culture in daily life setting, we argue to avoid a false dichotomy paradigm of making harsh normative judgment.

Keywords: Super Girls, subcultural capital, music studies, popular culture, China
In 2005, a working-class Chinese girl was labeled as Asia’s hero by *Time Magazine* (Jakes & Qu, 2005): Li Yuchun, the champion of a reality TV singing contest, *Super Girl*, drew more than three hundred thousand votes in the final round. The show was a Chinese version of *American Idol* but only for female contestants. Because it was the first television show that allowed the public to vote for the champion by sending mobile messages, *Super Girl* became extremely popular in 2005 and 2006. The champion of 2006, Shang Wenjie, won with more than five hundred thousand votes in the final contest.

When the show was in the height of its popularity in 2005 and 2006, the discussions were largely concerned with the democratic potential that the show brought to the society (Sun, 2006). For instance, *Time Magazine* described that the voting mechanism as an imitation of a democratic system (Jakes & Qu, 2005). However, as time passed by, the two champions’ iconic meanings have been incorporated into the dominant ideology in the society and reconstructed for different market targets.

The purpose of this paper is to understand dynamics and dimensions of popular culture in China. Based on the theoretical frameworks of cultural capital and postmodernism, we analyzed the cultural themes in these two singers’ profiles that are managed by their agents. We found that although the two champions had very similar style and earned their fame from the same show, their later music styles and marketing strategies were very distinctive. Li and Shang respectively represent the populist and petit-bourgeois forms of cultural capital and articulate two hierarchical statuses in the popular cultural field.

**The context and the concept**

*Super Girl* was hosted by Hunan Satellite Television (HNTV), a provincial satellite television station in Hunan Province. The first season was in 2004, but it did not receive national attention. In 2005, Li and her competitors’ styles challenged the stereotypical sweetheart image that was very popular among Chinese female singers. The show became
nationwide popular, with audiences of about three hundred million. The 2006 season followed such style and popularity. Finally in 2007, National Broadcasting and Television Bureau announced a regulation of reality TV singing contest. This regulation established a number of constraints for show times, candidates, judges, and emcees. Most importantly, it banned any types of off-site voting (Xinhua, 2007).

When Super Girl became a cultural phenomenon, intellectuals’ attention all focused on the voting mechanism, which invoked a heated debate about democratic potential in China (Meng, 2009; Sun, 2006; Tong, 2006). However, the show and the singers had never used any political discourses to promote themselves. In fact, the discussion of Super Girl was not the only case that fell into a control-versus-freedom model. As Akhavan (2012) points out, in the last three decades, research on Chinese media has been primarily based on a government-control-versus-press-freedom framework, which is largely influenced by Western liberal democratic ideology. The control-versus-freedom paradigm is redundant in explaining Chinese media phenomena, because it largely neglects negotiation and interaction among different social actors and ideological factions. It decontextualizes media with the society that produces it.

In 1978, Chinese government initiated a national reform program to establish Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, a bureaucratic state capitalist system. The program has established a limited market economy system with the government’s consistent intervention (Lieberthal, 2004). The economic reform accomplishes with cultural transformation. The media industry has also started its own reform program, so it is not monolithically manipulated by the government as it used to be (Donald & Keane, 2002; Polumbaum, 2008). Particularly since China entered WTO in 2001, media system has become more commercialized and audience appealing (Lee, 2003).
HNTV, which hosted *Super Girl*, headquarters in Changsha, Hunan Province. The station is under the supervision of, but not reliant on, the provincial Party Committee. The station pioneered the entertaining TV show format in China. In 1996, it piloted the entertaining game show, in response to the audience’s dissatisfaction with the pedagogic shows on Central China Television. HNTV’s shows have been nationally popular because they are apolitical and based on the youth lifestyle by bringing in celebrities from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Such an entertaining orientation maintains the station’s high ratings and ad revenues (Keane, 2002). The changing media environment is only one factor that supports the popular music contest’s success. The popular music also has its roots in Chinese contemporary postmodern culture.

Postmodernism as a concept was introduced to Chinese intellectual circles in the mid-1980s (Dirlik & Zhang, 1997). The core of the historical experience of Chinese postmodernity is post-socialism. It is expressed in terms of decentralization, transnational mobility, economic and cultural diversity, and consumerism, which is the “psycho-social” apparatus reconstructing and interpreting an individual’s consumption behaviors (Miles, 1998). The political hope of *Super Girl* is a typical example illustrating that commercial interests are packaged with a “democratic” disguise. The purpose of this study is to understand the dynamics and dimensions of commodification in the Chinese popular music.

**Analysis**

Textual and visual analysis was conducted to interpret Li’s and Shang’s online profiles that are managed by their agents. We first compared the text and pictures that were used to construct their images (Schröder, 2002). Second, these profiles listed the singers’ albums, most popular songs and MVs. We listened to these songs, and watched the videos,

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1 Shang’s profile: [http://baike.baidu.com/view/288728.htm](http://baike.baidu.com/view/288728.htm)
Li’s profile: [http://baike.baidu.com/view/3202.htm](http://baike.baidu.com/view/3202.htm)
and also read the lyrics while notes were taken of the emerging themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Saldana, 2009). The general cultural themes were later categorized based on the theoretical frameworks. We found three major themes: political remodeling, the link to the past, and the construction of the present.

**Political remodeling**

The oversea media articulated *Super Girl* with Western democratic political connotations, which in turn evoked governmental anxiety. To assuage such anxiety and to avoid governmental sanction, these singers’ agencies remodeled their images by catering to the discourses of the ruling power. This theme highlighted several similar strategies but with their own characteristics.

First of all, both the profiles mentioned the singers’ educational or up-bring background and represented a traditional expectation of good students. Therefore, even though these two singers’ original cultural capital was accumulated through their androgynous escaping from the parental class’ hegemony (Thornton, 1996), the later remodeling followed an institutionalized process that fitted to the ruling power’s discourse (Bourdieu, 1996). The resistant component was deliberately diluted. Second, the two singers’ involvements in governmental events were overwhelmingly listed. Li maintained a close relationship with the ruling party as a part of her healthy and upright image. Her titles were listed to demonstrate the governmental recognition of Li’s fame and influences in both cultural and political fronts. In addition to Li’s political involvements, Li’s profile also highlighted her role as an active philanthropist; she was the spokesperson for such organizations as The Red Cross, UNICEF, and WWF. In general, Li’s governmental recognition was at the national or even at the international level. Shang’s governmental recognition was limited in Shanghai or French-related activities. Her profile listed her extensive engagement in the 2010 Shanghai Expo. Across all her activities, Shang’s French fluency was repeatedly mentioned. Through such re-
articulation, these two “Super Girls” remapped their public persona in a way that neutralized governmental anxiety about their potential to mobilize political resistance.

**Nostalgia: the link to the past**

Nostalgia in postmodern China functions differently for both arising the middle class and the ruling power. The middle classes in metropolis, such as Shanghai, are unsatisfied with the chaotic reality and the dramatic social changes resulting in income inequality and tearing down of old neighborhoods. Nostalgia is a strategic need for the urban intellectuals to construct the individual existence and to correspond to the consumer market society (Dai, 2000). Likewise, the ruling power also use Confucian and patriotic values to create nationalist nostalgia to counter Western influence (Liu, 2000). Therefore, of these two tendencies of Chinese nostalgia, one is the aspiration to reconstruct the legacy of the ancient Chinese Empire; the other is to fulfill the sense of loss in the face of rapid globalization. Li and Shang respectively embody these two tendencies in their music. To explain these differences, We use Li’s “Youth of China” and Shang’s “Beneath Van Gogh’s Starry Sky” as the examples.

Li’s hit single “Youth of China” was the theme song for the state owned telecommunication company China Mobile during the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The song was an exclusively Chinese experience in every sense of the word. The song’s title, “Youth of China” was the name of a famous magazine in 1920s started by a number of modern Chinese political activists including one of the founding fathers of the Chinese Communist Party Li Dazhao. The lyrics extensively employed a number of Chinese historical and cultural references, such as the reference to the first verse in 6th century poet Li Bai’s *In the Stills of the Night* or through symbols related to Chinese culture or practices (e.g. the sika pile used in

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2 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OusG5alwWl0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OusG5alwWl0)
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martial arts, the ink painting, the swallow building a house under the eave, and of course, the
dragon which is always a symbol of Chinese strength and pride).

Moreover, the central verse of the song “a strong youth makes a fantastic China” was
referring to the famous quote by Liang Qichao “strong youth makes a strong nation.” Liang
was one of the pioneers’ of China’s modernization in the beginning of 20th Century, he
advocated for a political reform that used Western liberal ideals to reinvigorate imperial
China. Li’s song related China’s present economic reform to the period of drastic political
changes at the turn of the 20th century, and used the energy from that revolution past to
inspire the youths of today. This kind of memory was precisely the kind of nostalgia that the
Chinese government constantly uses to contain Western influences.

In contrary, Shang’s nostalgia traced to the West. Her first album named “Beneath Van
Gogh’s Starry Sky.” The hit of the same title was a light jazz song that evokes various images
related to Van Gogh3. In the lyrics, Van Gogh’s paintings and life were devoured as a collage,
devoid of the original meanings and context. The song expressed a nostalgic sentimentalism,
which had no connections with the Chinese culture or China’s past. In the MV, Shang
dressed in Bohemian style and is wandering alone in London. The song and the image
implied her own “arrogant solitude” that seemed to inherit from Van Gogh. However, the
video was shot in Great Britain, where was totally unrelated to Van Gogh. It only showed a
generic European city view as the background, which fitted the Chinese imagination of what
means to be European. Such European imagination was composed of both ancient and
modern elements. In Shang’s video, for instance, the churches, the statues, the flagstone road,
and the Victorian architectures, with the help of the yellow filter, comprised the sense of the
past; the double-deck bus, the underground subway, the elevator, the kissing couple, the
street musician and the brand placements, represented the Western modernity. All these

3 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hE0anYh4usQ
iconic symbols were grounded upon an imaginary base and indicated the embracement and celebration of the Western culture and history. This music commodity adopted the superficial mask of the European past and manifested the marketable elegant nostalgia among the Chinese urban elites (Dai, 2000). [Figure 1]

**Hybridity: the construction of the present**

As part of the Chinese consumerist culture, the popular music also features in the hybridity of locality and globality, as well as individualism and collectivism. These characteristics reflected in both Li’s and Shang’s music style but again with different manifestations.

When we looked back to the beginning of Li’s career, it was clear that she did not start out singing nationalistic inspirational songs. In fact, just one year before the release of “The Youth of China,” her musical style and branding strategy were still very similar to Shang; and most of her songs were quite Westernized as well. Her second album “Mine” was a primary example of how Westernization was incorporated into Li’s music. The first hit single of the album “My Kingdom” conveniently became the theme song for the series, and it was also a promotional song for an online game of the same title, which showed that Li’s brand was widely used in various cross-promotional endeavors. Just like Shang’s song, “My Kingdom” was a hybridity of various Western imageries that were arranged in a relatively nonsensical fashion, for example, although the melody and the MV connoted a medieval style, there was a line in lyrics that reads “The Broadway show playing at the Metropolitan Opera.” The sense of the West connotated in this sentence was a completely imaginary one because the Met does not play Broadway shows, and it is not even a Medieval European symbol; but it also went to show that Li’s music was one for the common people, because it only mixed

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4 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bs5WNgpfOew](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bs5WNgpfOew)
Western icons familiar to the average Chinese audience (and that was why they all seem out of place). [Figure 2]

In order to be coherent with her Westernizing image, Shang’s hybridity moved far away from the local Chineseness but gave prominence to the Western postmodern components. Particularly since 2010, Shang has established a Lady-Gaga-like style. Her agency kept promoting her as a fashion pioneer for white-collar office ladies. Her hits predominately and boldly expressed a worship of Western fashion brands. We used “Ms. Lane Crawford” as an example to explain Shang’s hybridity.

The song was sung in Chinese, English and French and has two versions: the original version⁵ and the remixed version⁶. The difference occurred in the refrain: the original version included a pastiche of Hong Kong popular singer, Faye Wong’s famous song – “Boring;” the remixed version replaced the pastiche refrain with rap in French of a series of fashion brands.

Lane Crawford is a Hong Kong landmark and an icon of the materialist values. It is a high-end retailing company with chain stores specializing in designer label luxury goods in Hong Kong and later in Shanghai and Beijing. Its target consumers are white-collar middle-class women – the so-called Ms. Lane Crawford. Therefore, the song expressed a shopaholic’s feeling of emptiness, loneliness and anxiety. It also indicated a rejection of the collectivist value in the Chinese traditional culture but a strong mood of middle-class individualism. Shang refused to do “what you want me to do” and simply want to be “extraordinary.” Such “extraordinary” achieved by being crazy in fashion, in appearance. In addition, Hong Kong’s post-colonial culture features in a hybridity of Western and Chinese components (Lee & Huang, 2002). Faye Wong, the singer of “Boring,” is a pop diva, pioneering in adopting Western experimental popular music style to Chinese popular songs.

⁵ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j00ls9JblyE&feature=related
⁶ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djJP3C7kOeo
In addition to Faye Wong, Shang also imitated Lady Gaga’s music and appearance. Particularly in the remixed version of “Ms. Lane Crawford,” the pastiche of Faye Wong was completely left out. Instead, the French rap of fashion brands did not only express a celebration of Western consumerist culture, but the French accent also indicated a worship of the authenticity of high-end fashion. In the Chinese imagination, France is the authentic stronghold of fashion. Therefore, Shang’s hybridity was a collage of the worship of authentic French high-end fashion, the imitation of American postmodern popular music and the pastiche of the pioneering postmodern attempt in Hong Kong. Covered by all these commoditized masks, her original Chineseness was deliberately diluted.

**Conclusion**

In this study, we discussed two tendencies of Chinese popular music, by comparing two Super Girl winners. We labeled them as populist and petit-bourgeois manifestations, which were respectively exampled by Li and Shang.

Li utilized her androgynous style to establish her unique existence as someone that was able to embody both genders. As a result her audience base widened to include everyone from young boys to middle aged women, and she maintained this style in her music career. However, Li’s ability to mobilize the general public and the liberal individualism she promoted in her songs soon became a liability under China’s current political climate—she became a reminder of Western democratic values that does not exist in China. Thus Li shifted her image to an advocate for traditional Chinese culture that emphasized the values of nationalism. Finally, Li’s involvement in various public and governmental affairs both at the national and the international levels strengthened her status as a public icon that was not only selected by the public (and in opposition to the government), but was also working hard for betterment of the public and the government alike.
In contrary, Shang manifests the petit-bourgeois tendency, which featured in the celebration of Western consumerist culture. First, it constructed an imaginary root from the Western history to express a nostalgic sentimentalism that rejected any Chinese origins. Second, it trumpeted the materialist individualism, which conflicted with the collectivist values of traditional Chinese culture, by creating an extraordinary appearance through consuming Western high-end fashion. Third, its departure from the Chineseness implied the worship of Western culture. Therefore, the petit-bourgeois manifestation catered to the urban middle class, who affords luxury fashion products and looks down to the Chineseness.

These distinctive manifestations indicated the tension between different culture-sharing groups in China; they also reflected the ideological battles in the popular music domain. However, these two manifestations shared both apolitical and commodifiable characteristics. The earlier discussion of Super Girl’s politically resistant meanings was deliberately dismissed in the winners’ later image-reconstructions. Instead, both these popular manifestations actively worked incongruence with the ruling power. Therefore, regardless of their expressions, both these two popular tendencies’ ultimate aim was to be commodified, which in turn can transfer the subcultural capitals into the mainstream economic capitals. The earlier view that stated the democratization can be achieved through the marketization of cultural industry was overly utopian and optimistic.

Therefore, a false dichotomy of domination versus subordination perspective would fail to understand the complexity of the cultural tension in China’s transitional moment. The society with long-standing historical memory is facing the face of globalization. As this study explicated, the discussion of cultural productions cannot be separated from the historical and social contexts. Instead of making harsh normative judgment, it is more vital to have a comprehensive understanding of the cultural dynamics in the multidimensional postmodern social context.
Figure 1. The screen shots from “Youth China” and “Beneath Van Gogh’s Starry Sky”

Youth China

Beneath Van Gogh’s Starry Sky
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Figure 2. The screenshots from “My Kingdom” and “Ms. Lane Crawford (Remixed version)”
Reference


